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by

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**Trapped in a Generic Closet:
Black-cast Television Sitcoms and Black Gay Men**

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Trapped in a Generic Closet:
Black-cast Television Sitcoms and Black Gay Men

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to two important men in my life. First, my dearly departed father Alfred Sr. (1944 – 2008), who taught me the value of hard work and perseverance and always supported me in whatever hair-brained idea I wanted to pursue. Second, my husband Tom, who like my father, supports me unequivocally. He possesses the greatest gift needed for the spouse of a dissertator: knowing when to leave the dissertator alone and when he needs a break from the madness of writing.

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Trapped in a Generic Closet:
Black-cast Television Sitcoms and Black Gay Men

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Trapped in a Generic Closet is an interdisciplinary, mixed methods project that examines the various sites where meaning is made and negotiated with respect to representations of black gay men in black-cast from the mid-late 1990s through the early part of the 21st century. Combining scholarship from TV genre theory, reception theory, authorship studies, critical race theory and queer media studies, this dissertation works toward developing a more holistic understanding of the ways black gayness operates within black-cast sitcoms. This project intervenes and works against the scholarly impetus to study lead and co-starring characters because they have more sustained visibility with viewers and instead examines those one-off (or nearly one-off) black gay male characters within the black sitcom because, I argue, they reveal more about the ways in which ideology function within the genre. It is within the moments of rupture that black gay guest-starring characters emerge that viewers can understand what the show's producers and writers (as a monolithic group) think about gayness and its intersection with comedy. Ultimately, this dissertation project shifts the scholarly attention away from white gay televisuality to black gay televisuality to explore the ways

homosexuality functions within the black sitcom and begin correcting the erasure of black queer bodies from the televisual canon of gay representation. Working in tandem with Roderick A. Ferguson, who posits “queer of color analysis extends women of color feminism by investigating how intersecting racial, gender, and sexual practices antagonize and/or conspire with the normative investments of nation-states and capital,” this project seeks to extend this critique to the black-cast sitcom and examines the sites where meaning about black gay characters is made.

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Introduction: Television in Black and Gay

Growing up in Detroit in the 1980s, television was an important and ubiquitous part of my life. I watched both with my family and alone late at night when my house on Detroit's northwest side was otherwise quiet. Whether I was watching with family or alone, one thing was often constant in my television-watching diet — I loved sitcoms. From well-known network/early post-network era series like *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975-1985), *Diff'rent Strokes* (NBC, 1978-1985; ABC, 1985-1986), *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-1992), and *A Different World* (NBC, 1987-1993), to lesser-known and almost entirely forgotten series like *Webster* (ABC, 1983-1987; first-run syndication 1987-1989), *227* (NBC, 1985-1990), *He's the Mayor* (ABC, 1986) and *What's Happenin' Now* (first-run syndication 1985-1988), I was enraptured by the 22-minute lessons espoused by the sitcom, particularly those that featured a predominance of black bodies.

Even as it was easy to find black bodies on television in the 1980s, there were few opportunities to see my whole intersectional self. That is not to say that I knew that I was gay, or that I even knew what the word “gay” meant, but I knew there was something different about me, something I looked for but did not regularly find on television. The one instance when I saw black gay men on television was on *In Living Color's* (FOX, 1990-1994) “Men On...” sketches. *In Living Color* premiered on April 15, 1990, and won an Emmy award for Outstanding Variety, Music, or Comedy Series in its inaugural season. The sketches starred heterosexual actors Damon Wayans and David Alan Grier as Blaine Edwards and Antoine Meriwether respectively as effeminate cultural critics and

premiered in the first episode of the series.¹ The sketches featured the pair as they commented on movies, sports, and culture from a caricatured gay point of view. They loved everything that featured men and greeted anything with women by saying, in unison, “Hated it!” Marlon T. Riggs aptly describes the pair as “camp queens [who] greet [viewers] in living color.”² Despite their problematic representation of black gay men, the characters were an instant hit with many viewers and quickly became recurring characters on the series and spawned a pop culture phenomenon with their pithy re-signification of Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert’s “two thumbs up” as “two snaps up.”

The ways these actors embodied these caricatures of gay men relied heavily on sartorial choices, behaviors and mannerisms. As E. Patrick Johnson argues “because [Antoine and Blaine] never explicitly state that they are gay, their pseudodrag, along with their effete mannerisms are meant to signify the ‘gayness’ of the characters.”³ These actors are often costumed in pink and lavender fabrics. In the sketch, “Men On... Cooking,” Blaine wears a pink chiffon blouse with oversized, puffy sleeves and a rose colored apron over the ensemble along with mint green flowing pants that in no way can be construed as a “man’s” pair of pants.⁴ To top off his ensemble, he wears a small hat with bangs sticking out of the front on his otherwise baldhead. The colors and fabrics Antoine wears are less queer/feminine rather it is the style of his clothing that queers him.

¹ *In Living Color*, Airdate April 15, 1990.

² Marlon Riggs, “Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen,” in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, eds. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 470.

³ E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 66.

⁴ *In Living Color*, Airdate November 22, 1992.

He wears green knickers and a yellow shirt with an oversized, upturned collar and a choker necklace. In their sketch, “Men On... Vacation,” Blaine wears a pink Speedo covered by a magenta sarong and a multi-colored shirt that he ties at the waist.⁵ Antoine wears a one-piece yellow and black tight bathing suit with a plunging neckline that reveals his pectorals.

Blaine and Antoine also affected lisping speech patterns that are vastly different from the voices in which Wayans and Grier speak during other sketches when they are meant to portray heterosexual characters. The lisp is a semiotic device that allows gayness to be read onto their bodies.⁶ The lisp is important because, coupled with wearing feminine clothing, it is among the attributes that sociologists Mary Kite and Kate Deaux found were most expected from/attributed to gay men.⁷ In other words, these performances deliver on expectations of mass-mediated gayness.

Blaine and Antoine were controlling images of black gay men – images designed to be “held up to be variously laughed at or ridiculed and/or rejected or scorned, consequently discounting their power as well as their claim to humanity.”⁸ However, these images instructed me on the boundaries of black masculinity. My family would gather around the television set in my parent’s bedroom to watch Blaine Edwards and

⁵ *In Living Color*, Airdate November 18, 1990.

⁶ Throughout this project, I most often use the word gayness because I find the word “homosexuality” to be overly clinical and “queer” is not how I might describe the televisual representation this project investigates.

⁷ Mary E. Kite and Kay Deaux, “Gender Belief Systems: Homosexuality and Implicit Inversion Theory,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 11 (1987): 83-96.

⁸ Jasmine Cobb and Robin Means Coleman, “Two Snaps and a Twist: Controlling Images of Black Male Homosexuality on Television,” *African American Research Perspectives* 13 (2010): 88.

Antoine Meriwether camp it up on FOX's *In Living Color* (FOX, 1990-1994) with their lascivious act representing cock-hungry, woman-hating, effeminate gay men. Because they failed to conform to the ways in which "real black men" behave, their brand of camp could be disseminated and ridiculed. The heterosexual comedians who embodied Blaine and Antoine (Wayans and Grier, respectively) showed black Americans what gayness was (and what it was not/could not be). Antoine and Blaine scared me deep into the closet. Although I knew I was different, this was not the kind of difference I wanted to embody.

In Living Color was the only time I saw gay bodies (or at least bodies I read as gay) on television. And although I knew that I might be, in some way, like the men of the "Men On..." sketches, my mother helped to police my behavior through these images. "Men On..." was met with laughs full of derision. These queens were useful only for their quick wit, but their wit was in the service of upholding hegemonic normativity. My mother's laughter with respect to the "Men On..." sketches helped me develop an understanding of the ways queer bodies function in heteronormative society. Gayness could either occupy the space of humor in jokes designed to make non-queer bodies laugh because of the proximity of gayness and femininity. When that comic role is not fulfilled, then gay bodies are called upon to uphold hegemonic definitions of (hetero)normativity. Both roles functioned as a way to police homosexuality as well as heteronormativity. These "controlling images" were used to discipline my body into

performing a particular type of masculinity that would not outwardly be read as gay.⁹ *Trapped in a Generic Closet* is concerned with the ways those controlling images circulate within black televisual spaces.

What I mean by “circulate” is that I am not “only” interested in the image of black gay men. Rather, extending Julie D’Acci’s (2004) “circuit of media” approach to black gayness in the black-cast sitcom, *Trapped in a Generic Closet* examines this topic in relation to the cultural artifact, production, reception and socio-historical context. For the purposes of this project, the cultural artifact is the black-cast sitcom and black gayness within it. With respect to production, I turn to the credited episode writers to examine the contestations and negotiations they underwent as they attempted to write episodes of black-cast sitcoms with black gay characters. Inextricably linked to production is the notion of “controlling images,” which on one hand provide the dominant scripts for televisual black gayness and, on the other hand, provide images for writers to work with and against. Reception, which is also bound up in controlling images and the ways black gay men understand stereotypes, is studied via interviews with black gay men. Lastly, socio-historical context is important in all the areas within the circuit to articulate the ways these images function. Of particular importance is the mass mediation of hegemonic black masculinity and the ways these inflexible ideals function to closet black gayness within the black-cast sitcom.

Trapped in a Generic Closet is an interdisciplinary, mixed-methods project that is both personal and political. On one hand, the project originates from my inability to see

⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

myself reflected on television's screen when I was growing up. On the other hand, the project is political in that it is bound up in the politics of representation. It is deeply rooted in "systems of representation that produce meaning through the display of objects."¹⁰ In this way then, the project examines the tensions related to television representation by examining some of the sites where meaning is/can be made: production, post-production and audience reception. Using episodic case studies from black-cast sitcoms that feature black gay characters from 1996-2010, this project combines scholarship from TV genre theory, reception theory, authorship studies, critical race theory and queer media studies and works toward developing a more holistic understanding of the ways black gayness functions within black-cast sitcoms.

This project intervenes in the ways research on gay images has historically been conducted in two distinct ways. First, the media texts that have been studied, from *Queer As Folk* (Showtime, 2000 – 2005) and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Bravo, 2003-2007) to *The L Word* (Showtime, 2004 – 2009), *Glee* (FOX, 2009 -), and *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009 -), have focused on white televisual gayness in white/multicultural-cast series. I argue there are two reasons for this focus: first, it involves numbers – there have simply been more white gay characters on television. Looking at the televisual landscape, there are more white heterosexual characters on television than black heterosexual characters, which realistically should translate into more white gay characters than black, particularly in an industry where televisual blackness equals "black show," whereas

¹⁰ Henrietta Lidchi, "The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures," in *Representation: Cultural Presentations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, (London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 1997), 153.

televisual whiteness equals “mainstream show.” Additionally, within this notion of mainstream whiteness is also an assumption that gayness is also whiteness. As Allan Bérubé argues, “the dominant image of the typical gay man is a white man who is financially better off than most everyone else.”¹¹ Second, the shows that have been studied extensively have achieved ratings success, no matter the myriad ways in which different networks define notions of “ratings success.” Ultimately, the ratings, popularity and availability of these series via DVD and/or streaming/digital media platforms gesture toward the ways these series have been cemented into the cultural memory. However, while these series might be more recognizable and more easily obtained, that does not mean they are the only series worthy of study.

In addition, *Trapped in a Generic Closet* contributes to the little existing research that specifically addresses black gay televisual representation. While other studies have focused on a single representation of black gay maleness within a single media text, this project puts these representations in conversation with one another. The inquiries into images of black gay men in television are often sections within book chapters: Suzanna Danuta Walters briefly discusses *Spin City* in *All the Rage*¹² as does Steven Capsuto in *Alternative Channels*.¹³ In addition, Herman Gray devotes a section of a chapter to *In*

¹¹ Allan Bérubé “How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays,” in *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, ed. Brigit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klineberg, Irene J. Nexica and Matt Wray (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 234.

¹² Suzanna Danuta Walters, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 105.

¹³ Steven Capsuto, *Alternative Channels: The Uncensored Story of Gay and Lesbian Images on Radio and Television*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000), 375.

Living Color in *Watching Race*¹⁴ and E. Patrick Johnson does the same in *Appropriating Blackness*.¹⁵ Lastly, Samuel Chambers analyzes *Six Feet Under* in *The Queer Politics of Television*.¹⁶ All of these authors employ textual analysis as their primary methodology. While each author gestures toward socio-cultural contexts, each is primarily interested in the image, rather than also production, audience reception or socio-cultural context.

Even when scholars turn to more lengthy examinations of black gayness, they retain a focus on examining the image. Guy Mark Foster explicitly discusses matters of race and how they can become conflated with desire in his examination of *Six Feet Under* in an edited anthology on queer television aesthetics.¹⁷ Johnson turns to *In Living Color* and Eddie Murphy to examine “negro faggotry.”¹⁸ Gust A. Yep and John P. Elia examine notions of “authentic blackness” on *Noah’s Arc* and assert that authentic blackness is linked to social class in its association with working classedness and its segregation from white hegemony.¹⁹ However, these authors are largely bringing specific theoretical approaches to bear on texts without examining other forces that shape the ways black gay

¹⁴ Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1995), 141.

¹⁵ Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 66.

¹⁶ Smauel A. Chambers, *The Queer Politics of Television* (New York: I. B. Tauris & Co, Ltd., 2009), 38

¹⁷ Guy Mark Foster, "Desire and the 'Big Black Sex Cop': Race and the Politics of Intimacy on HBO's *Six Feet Under*" in *The New Queer Aesthetic on Television: Essays on Recent Programming*, ed. James Keller & Leslie Stratyner (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishers, 2006), 109.

¹⁸ E. Patrick Johnson, “The Specter of the Black Fag: Parody, Blackness, and Hetero/Homosexual B(r)others,” *Queer Theory and Communication* 45, no. 2, 3 and 4 (2003): 232.

¹⁹ Gust A. Yep and John P. Elia, “Queering/Quaring Blackness in Noah’s Arc,” in *Queering Popular Culture*, ed. Tom Peele (New York: Palgrave Publishers, 2007), 1.

images are created, distributed, understood and consumed, an undertaking *Trapped in a Generic Closet* attempts.

At its core, *Trapped in a Generic Closet* asserts the primacy of the black cast-sitcom as both a genre and for black popular culture broadly. While the sitcom is often dismissed as a genre, I argue that study of the black-cast sitcom has import. However, before specifically discussing the black-cast sitcom, it is important to discuss the sitcom generally.

Larry Mintz provides a good definition of the sitcom to begin working with and against when he offers that the sitcom is:

A half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters with the same premise. That is, each week we encounter the same people in essentially the same setting. The episodes are finite: what happens in a given episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved at the end of the half hour.²⁰

Mintz highlights the ways that the sitcom is 30-minutes long and episodic, rather than serial, which means that the narrative clock resets each week. While the sitcom is predicated on an inherent forgetting that allows characters to forget the lesson(s) learned the previous week, this is particularly important when considering gay characters generally, and black gay characters specifically.

How, if at all, does what I am calling the black-cast sitcom differ? I argue that the black-cast sitcom means more than “just” having black people on the television screen. Robin Means Coleman posits that the black-cast sitcom will often have a black producer,

²⁰ Larry Mintz, “Situation Comedy” in *TV Genres*, ed. Brian Rose (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985), 114.

writer or director and that the black characters on the show “have limited contact with people of other races or ethnicities... [and] the characters employ Black language and verbal forms (often blackvoice), and tend to focus on black issues such as racism.”²¹ I will return to Means Coleman’s assertion about black production shortly in conjunction with Kristal Brent Zook’s assertions below. For now, I want to address the segregation of black bodies into the black sitcom because it is a useful distinction in defining the back sitcom. This criteria helps to explain *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-1992) as a sitcom rather than a black sitcom since the Huxtables very frequently interacted with a wide range of people across racial and ethnic categories. Means Coleman’s distinction also helps to place a more contemporary show like *My Wife and Kids* (ABC, 2001-2005) within the canon of black-cast sitcoms because of the show’s interaction with an almost exclusive black populace. This distinction becomes particularly helpful in an era in which the marker of black-cast sitcoms became their location on startup netlets like the WB and UPN whereas *My Wife and Kids* aired on ABC. However, Means Coleman’s discussion of blackvoice is a slippery criterion to pin down, particularly given that non-black bodies in televisual spaces have adapted “blackvoice” as a signifier of “cool.”

Kristal Brent Zook further complicates this notion of the black-cast sitcom and finds four common traits in shows she considers black-cast sitcoms:

²¹ Robin R. Means Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Black Humor* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 2000), 69; Means Coleman's usage of blackvoice is similar to Michele Hilmes' earlier usage in *Radio Voices*. Hilmes uses it to refer to specifically to the radio performances of white actors using minstrel dialect to perform as African American characters in radio series such as *Amos 'n' Andy*.

...autobiography, meaning a tendency toward collective and individual authorship of black experience; improvisation, the practice of inventing and ad-libbing unscripted dialogue or action; aesthetics, a certain pride in visual signifiers of blackness; and drama, a marked desire for complex characterizations and emotionally challenging subject matter.²²

While I remain skeptical of Zook's first three observations about the black-cast sitcom, her discussion of aesthetic cultural specificity is useful. She argues that while rap music and a "new jack swing" aesthetic infiltrated multiple television shows in the late 1980s and early 1990s, "Afrocentric clothing, hair styles, and artifacts performed specific functions in black shows. Frequent references to Malcolm X in *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *Martin* and *Roc*... in the form of posters, photographs and T-shirts, invoked romanticized spaces of mythical unity and nationalist desire."²³ To this black aesthetic, I add that shows in this era also utilized musical artists primarily rooted in black culture to sing television show theme songs. For example, after being revamped following its first season to incorporate a more "authentically" black aesthetic, *A Different World* employed Aretha Franklin to sing the show's theme song. Additionally, the R&B quartet En Vogue sang the theme song for *Roc*. Lastly, series star Will Smith rapped his way through the theme song for *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* while series star Queen Latifah delivered the theme song for *Living Single* (1993-1998).

²² Kristal Brent Zook, *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, 8.

However, none of these scholars consider the way the black-cast sitcom works industrially. Scheduling helps to make sense of television flow so that shows with similar tone (both in terms of feel and the race of the bodies on screen) will be placed within close proximity to one another.²⁴ While networks seek to find similarities between shows, this scheduling strategy of pairing “like with like becomes problematic when networks assume that similar ethnic identities among casts equates to similar content.”²⁵ Brett Mills further illuminates the industrial logic behind this pairing system when he asserts the comedy is an “industrial tool for cohering specific audience groups, with the implication that such groups find similar things funny, and have similar responses to particular character types.”²⁶ This became especially problematic with *Frank’s Place* (CBS, 1987-1988), a short-lived CBS sitcom starring husband and wife team Tim Reid and Daphne Maxwell-Reid. Although *Frank’s Place* billed itself as a “different” kind of sitcom, it still qualifies as one of the three subgenres of the black sitcom identified by Angela M. S. Nelson: dramedy.²⁷ Tim Reed, the star and producer of the show, explicitly stated that *Frank’s Place* was “an attempt to redefine the black sitcom formula.”²⁸ An attempt to redefine (and presumably elevate) the black sitcom can often be accompanied with its

²⁴ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).

²⁵ Amanda Dyanne Lotz, “Segregated Sitcoms: Institutional Causes of Disparity among Black and White Comedy Images and Audiences,” in *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed*, ed. Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 146.

²⁶ Brett Mills, *Television Sitcom* (London, UK: The British Film Institute, 2005), 5.

²⁷ Angela M. S. Nelson, “Black Situation Comedy and the Politics of Television Art” in *Cultural Diversity and the U.S. Media*, ed. Yahya R. Kamalipour and Theresa Carilli (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 79.

²⁸ Zook, *Color By Fox*, 9.

own unique set of challenges. As Daphne Maxwell-Reid illuminates in Marlon Riggs' Award-winning documentary *Color Adjustment*, which details the more than 40 years of blackness on television, "[CBS] didn't know how to handle [*Frank's Place*] and they supposedly couldn't schedule it with anything. Whatever they scheduled it with there was a problem. It didn't relate to anything else they had on the schedule. So, they moved it—six times. The audience couldn't find the show. My mother couldn't even find the show half the time."²⁹ In other words, this notion of "flow" is markedly important.³⁰ Initially placing *Frank's Place* on its Monday night comedy block with *Kate & Allie* (CBS, 1984-1989), *Newhart* (CBS, 1982-1990), and *Designing Women* (CBS, 1986-1993) did not work for its ratings. *Frank's Place* was a single camera, laugh-trackless, cinematic-style thirty-minute comedy/drama among three-camera, laugh track, proscenium-style thirty-minute comedies. One might deduce that with the choice to pair *Frank's Place* with these shows placed the emphasis on comedy (although one might argue that the comedy on *Frank's Place* was far more subtle than the broader humor of the other shows with which it was initially paired). After juggling the show into three different positions in its Monday night lineup, *Frank's Place* was ultimately moved to Tuesday nights and closed a comedy night comprised of the short-lived Hispanic comedy *Trial & Error* (CBS, 1988) starring Paul Rodriguez, which led off the night's comedy block followed by three-camera, proscenium-style comedies *My Sister Sam* (CBS, 1986-1988) and *Coming of Age* (CBS, 1988). Interestingly, this scheduling move resulted in *Frank's Place* immediately

²⁹ *Color Adjustment*, directed by Marlon T. Riggs (2004; Los Angeles: Signifyin' Works) DVD.

³⁰ Williams, *Television*.

preceding *Cagney & Lacey* (CBS, 1981-1988), which seemed to imply that *Frank's Place* could not (and should not) be so closely related to other comedies on CBS' schedule because it borrowed from the generic conventions of the television drama. Additionally, pairing *Frank's Place* with *Trial & Error* on the same night implicitly suggests that CBS assumed that if viewers came to the channel to watch the Hispanic comedy, they would stay for the black one, nodding to the notion that ethnicity can unite television viewers without regard to a show's content or tone.

While the sitcom has been seemingly ever-present in our culture, it has concomitantly been the space where non-white races have been segregated. The first places where black people appeared on television were within the sitcom, particularly as stars of their own shows. With few exceptions, black representation has remained segregated in the sitcom to this day. I argue that part of the reason for this segregation has two roots. First, because of this televisual segregation (coupled with a largely segregated culture writ large), the image of blackness and the ways it relies (or refuses to rely) on dominant racial stereotypes takes on greater meaning. As such, almost from its inception, scholars, cultural critics, and "lay people" have focused on the image of blackness in media, particularly television. According to Brett Mills, the sitcom and stereotypes are so closely linked "because comedy is often examined, in its social context, through its relationship to power, and stereotyping more generally has connections to power too. For many, one of the ways in which power exerts itself socially is through comedy."³¹

³¹ Mills, *Television Sitcom*, 103.

As Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik argue, “given the prevalence in any culture of models and stereotypes of people, professions, races, nations, and roles, it is hardly surprising that deviations from type... are so frequently a source of comic improbability and, hence, comic surprise.”³² As such, stereotypes have become one of the main prisms through which race and the sitcom is discussed. Many scholars have pointed out the fervor that erupted from “the black community” (here represented by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)) when *Beulah* (1950 – 1953) and *Amos ‘n’ Andy* (1951 – 1953) premiered because those representations relied on “negative” stereotypes of black people. It was not necessarily that the NAACP claimed these representations were inaccurate depictions of some black people, but their protests were rooted in these black representations failing to reflect the “respectable” image of a middle class, educated black populace that was more aspirational. Angela M.S. Nelson places this desire for fictional roles to be more indicative of black socio-economic mobility:

The Black middle class did not approve of Blacks in roles as domestics because they favored roles that were descriptive of the kinds of jobs and occupations more and more Blacks were obtaining after World War II. Indeed, African Americans were college professors, physicians, attorneys, insurance agents, and bank officials, but they were also factory workers, domestics, and farmers.³³

³² Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 88-89.

³³ Nelson, “Black Situation Comedies,” 82.

Amos 'n' Andy's position within the canon of black representation remains contested contemporarily. Scholars continue to vacillate on whether or not *Amos 'n' Andy* is (problematically) positive or negative. Haggins places *Amos 'n' Andy* and *Beulah* within the negative by asserting that the two series ushered in a televisual era of the “happy ducky” because “neither of these series were going after a black audience share—the minstrel archetypes were deliberate and designed to amuse and comfort the new medium's predominantly white audience.”³⁴ But Haggins also allows “the problem with *Amos 'n' Andy* was the domination of the stereotypical characters Kingfish and Andy.”³⁵ Robin R. Means Coleman asserts that *Amos 'n' Andy* remains problematic because while it featured black actors in the roles, these black actors were hired to embody roles they would be trained to perform by Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, the white actors/creators of the series in its radio incarnation, therefore they were simply reinscribing harmful stereotypes of black men.³⁶ However, Mel Watkins asserts that what made *Amos 'n' Andy* unique and for him, more positive than it was viewed in its cultural moment, is that the series featured a self-sustaining black community comprised of black people from different socioeconomic strata, from doctors, lawyers and bankers to waiters and shop keepers.³⁷ While Means Coleman allows that there was a wide range of socioeconomic statuses reflected in the show, she asks “how equal is the *Amos 'n' Andy* world where even the black upper crust speak in blackvoice (a “voice” she argues,

³⁴ Ibid., 219

³⁵ Ibid., 218.

³⁶ Means Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy*, 58.

³⁷ Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock* (New York: Lawrence Books, 1994), 276

following Hilmes, gets developed in radio as a way to signify blackness); where the professional/business class are so unprofessional as professionals they scheme, hustle and lie?”³⁸ The tension between these scholars illuminates the problematic nature of attempting to place *Amos ‘n’ Andy* (or any other representation, for that matter) into a positive/negative binary – a binary that is predicated on one person’s (or organization’s) understanding of the “right” way to depict a people. These arguments for positivity or negativity fail to recognize the duplicitous nature of postmodernism. The inherent question is what is negative, who gets to define negativity and what are the reasons those ideas are constructed as “negative”?³⁹

The primacy of the black-cast sitcom is also rooted in the ways that ethnicity, sexuality and humor are seemingly inextricably linked (which I will discuss in greater detail later in Chapter 2). In particular, the sitcom broadly, and the black-cast sitcom specifically, seeks to find humor in situations that often include marking one character as “comic.” Understanding the theories of humor, specifically the Superiority theory, which posits that “human beings are moved to laugh when presented with a person or situation they feel themselves to be intellectually, morally or physically above,” can help to explain the ways the “comic” is marked within a black-cast sitcom.⁴⁰ In this way, I forward that the black-cast sitcom uses humor as a means to reify “the status quo either by denigrating a certain sector of society...or by laughing at the alleged stupidity of a

³⁸ Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy*, 53.

³⁹ For a more thorough discussion of this debate, see Sasha Torres, *Black, White, and in Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁴⁰ Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 131-132.

social outsider.”⁴¹ Even as the black-cast sitcom only engages with black gayness in an episodic fashion, the genre can use humor to not only position black gayness as an outsider, but also reify its deviation from black normativity. The centrality of this kind of humor is particularly important and illuminating when discussing the inclusion of new characters, especially black gay characters, to the black-cast sitcom structure.

Ultimately, *Trapped in a Generic Closet* asks, building upon Michel Foucault, is black gay visibility a trap? Foucault argues, that within prisons “Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor... He is the object of information, never a subject in communication.”⁴² While Foucault is addressing prisons and not black gay men or television, his work is instructive here. I am not suggesting that television is a prison; however, I am suggesting that the black-cast sitcom is a place that traps black gayness into “securely confined” spaces and roles. More importantly, as Foucault would point out, black gay men in black-cast sitcoms are the “object of information” about sexualities and their deviance from what is understood as “normal.” There is never an attempt to relate narratives from the perspective of the black gay “Other”; rather, he is always providing information about the hegemonic confines of “authentic” blackness and black masculinity. It is for this reason that I focus specifically on black gayness in black-cast sitcoms.

Broadly, *Trapped in a Generic Closet* asks: if we look beyond the level of the image, how might we understand the ways black gayness ideologically functions within

⁴¹ Simon Critchley, *On Humor* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 12.

⁴² Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (NY: Vintage Books 1995), 200.

the black-cast sitcom? To answer this broad question, I am interested in the ways studying production, post-production and audience reception, provide a snapshot of the construction, meanings and ideologies attached to television images of black gay men. I am interested in three sites for meaning-making throughout this project. First, I examine production and the ways episodes are written by conducting interviews with the episodes' credited writers. Second, I analyze post-production via the laugh track and humor theory. Third, I use in-depth interviews with black gay men to gauge audience reception. The convergences (and divergences) help to suggest cultural understanding of black gayness within the imagined black public that is the black-cast sitcom.

Within this study, it is necessary to operationalize three terms. First, and perhaps most importantly, I deploy "black gay" and "gay black" very deliberately throughout this project. There is a scholarly tension between "black gay" and "gay black" identities. Gregory Conerly argues that this hierarchy of identities is a "central conflict many African American lesbians, bisexuals and gays experience in dealing with two identities that are often at odds with each other."⁴³ The difference between these two identities, according to Darieck Scott, is that gay black men have "political, social and cultural allegiances... to 'white' gay politics, to 'white' gay men and to 'white' cultural forms" whereas a black gay man's identity is rooted in blackness, including black culture, black politics and presumably a romantic preference for other black gay men.⁴⁴ This debate

⁴³ Gregory Conerly, "Are You Black First Or Are You Queer?," in *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, ed. Delroy Constantine-Simms (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2001), 7.

⁴⁴ Darieck Scott, "Jungle Fever: Black Identity Politics, White Dick and the Utopian Bedroom," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 3 (2004): 300.

between black gay vs. gay black is reductive in “real life.” However, for the purposes of this project, I deploy the term “black gay” to center blackness as a major axis of identity for black gay men in black-cast sitcoms.

Additionally, I employ the term “black-cast sitcom” in this project. Because of the slipperiness and difficulty of pinning down some of the defining criteria with respect to black sitcoms, I build upon a definition forwarded by Robin R. Means Coleman and Charlton D. McIlwain which documents that a “black situation comedy describes programming that employs a core cast of African American characters and focuses on those characters’ sociocultural, political and economic experiences.”⁴⁵ Building on this definition, I use the term “black-cast sitcom” to denote the ways that I am focusing on the racial make-up of the primary cast when I deem a series a black-cast sitcom.

Lastly, this project hinges on a definition of what I am calling the “generic closet.” First, the “generic” in the term “generic closet” refers to the ways that I suggest the black-cast sitcom, as a genre, functions as an industrial representation of an imagined monolithic blackness. The “closet” engages with two intersecting sets of discourses. First, and most importantly, it gestures toward the ways that coming-out of the closet works as an organizing logic for the ways black gayness is granted tenure within black-cast sitcoms. Certainly, for many gay men and women, “coming out” – the act of telling family, loved ones, friends, and/or co-workers – is an important rite of passage and part of one’s gay identity development. Several scholars have developed identity development

⁴⁵ Robin R. Means Coleman and Charlton D. McIlwain, “The Hidden Truths in Black Sitcoms,” in *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed*, ed. Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 125.

models to explain the ways in which gay men (and sometimes lesbians) make sense of their gayness. These models range from the widely-accepted six-step model developed by Vivienne Cass; the four-stage models developed by Donna Johns and Tahira Probst, Henry L. Minton and Gary J. McDonald; and Robert J. Kus; the three-stage model developed by Richard Troiden; and the two-step model developed by Stephen Brady and Wilma Busse.⁴⁶ Regardless of the number of stages any of the scholars believe is associated with identity development, they all include a step that includes disclosure of one's sexual orientation.⁴⁷ The act of publicly being out of the closet is understood as a political act, one that demonstrates that a person is proud and liberated from the oppression of homophobia within a heteronormative society.

The second discourse is related to knowledge production in a heteronormative culture. Foucault argues that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries “the sexuality of those who did not like the opposite sex” came under scrutiny and marked a time when “these figures, scarcely noticed in the past” were called upon to “step forward and speak

⁴⁶ Vivienne C. Cass, “Homosexual Identity Formation: Testing a Theoretical Model,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 20 no. 2 (1984): 143-167.; Donna J. Johns and Tahira M. Probst, “Sexual Minority Identity Formation in an Adult Population,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 47, no. 2 (2004): 81-90.; Henry Minton and Gary McDonald, “Homosexual Identity Formation as a Development Process,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 9 no. 2/3 (1984): 91-104.; Robert J. Kus, “Stages of Coming Out: An Ethnographic Approach,” *Western Journal of Nursing* 7 no. 2 (1985): 177-198.; Richard Troiden, “Becoming Homosexual: A Model of Gay Identity Acquisition,” *Psychiatry* 42 no. 4 (1979): 362-373.; Stephen Brady and Wilma J. Busse, “The Gay Identity Questionnaire: A Brief Measure of Homosexual Identity Formation,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 26 no. 4 (1994).

⁴⁷ The models discussed here do not include the ones that specifically discuss the differences in identity development for raced bodies. Those models often conclude that coming-out is not always a required step for gay men of color in identity development. However, television, even when focused on the experiences of bodies of color, adopts a Eurocentric perspective that, I argue, privileges “raceless” models of gay identity development.

[and] make the difficult confession of who they were.”⁴⁸ Foucault’s mention of “stepping forward” became the root of the theoretical understanding of the closet as an organizing principle for gay men and lesbians.

The organizing logic of the closet is most often deployed with episodic gay characters (such as those that are the subject of this dissertation). As Stephen Tropiano asserts, “the most common gay-themed episode is the ‘coming-out’ episode, typically concerning a series regular who learns someone in his or her life... is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.”⁴⁹ By the end of the half-hour episode, viewers will know who is gay and who is not. Once this confirmation (and confession) occurs, these gay characters, because of their supporting role in the show, ride off into the sunset without allowing viewers to understand what the confession/stepping forward means. Yes, the viewers know that the character is gay or lesbian, but they have no concept of what that means for the world the other (presumed) heterosexual characters inhabit. As Lynne Joyrich asserts, “the closet becomes an implicit TV form – a logic governing not only the ways in which gays and lesbians are represented but also the generation of narratives and positions on and for TV even in the absence of openly gay characters (or gay characters at all).”⁵⁰

Walters suggests that the closet does not work as a governing logic behind shows where gay characters are already out like *Spin City* (ABC, 1996-2002) and *Will & Grace* (NBC, 1998-2006). She argues, “when gay characters don’t emerge in a singular moment

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1* (New York: Random House, 1990), 39.

⁴⁹ Stephen Tropiano, *The Prime Time Closet: A History of Gays and Lesbians on TV* (New York: Applause Books, 2002) 191-192.

⁵⁰ Lynne Joyrich, “Epistemology of the Console,” in *Queer TV: Theories, Historic, Politics*, ed. Glyn Davis and Gary Needham (New York: Routledge, 2009), 27.

of coming out, they are necessarily more integrated into the gestalt of the series. Because ‘coming out’ does present a before and after, it presents a problem for those coming out, for their friends, for their family, for the plot itself.”⁵¹ What Walters misses is that *Spin City* still reconstructs the closet by introducing new characters and situations that requires coming-out narratives whether it is *Spin City*’s Carter Heywood having to confess his sexuality to his childhood priest or series regular Mike’s old Navy buddy appearing for an episode to come out of the closet. Additionally, coming out becomes an important theme when *Will & Grace*’s Jack McFarland must come out to his mother or through a flashback in which the closet is reconstructed so viewers are not deprived of Will’s coming out narrative. Ultimately, Joyrich’s assertions about the overarching import of the closet (and more importantly, coming out of it) continue to be useful as a frame through which gay representation, particularly on the major broadcast networks, can be examined.

While the black gay characters I will discuss in this project certainly come out of the closet in the ways many of the theorists discuss, I am more interested in the ways that the black-cast sitcom functions as a closet that (to gesture back to Foucault) traps black gay men into particular roles, functions and, more importantly, episodic appearances and limits the frameworks through which “authentic” black masculinity can be understood. As such, “generic closet” as deployed within this project (and its title) gestures toward the ways the black-cast sitcom, as a distinct genre, bound up in ideologies and mythologies about black audiences, creates specific narrative conditions under which black gayness is permissible. The deployment of black gayness, once those narrative

⁵¹ Walters, *All the Rage*, 105.

conditions have been met, must be returned to the closet and hidden away from the heteronormative black-cast sitcom universes they disrupted for an episode or two.

Four bodies of research form the foundation on which this project builds. First, it is necessary to lay the industrial and socio-cultural ground on which this project wrests. Second, I grapple with the ways the black-cast sitcom is understood as a black public imaginary/imagined black public. Third, I examine the ways black gayness is imagined as the “Other” with respect to the hegemonic confines of black masculinity. Lastly, I assess the differences in the ways representations of black gayness and white gayness have developed, to reassert the importance of studying black gayness within the black-cast sitcom. In the next several sections, I survey the important scholarship that, when brought together, provide the theoretical scaffolding for this project.

Post-Network Television and the (Re)Mediation of Black Culture

The series on which this project focuses were broadcast in a very specific period in television history – 1996 to 2010, or within the post-network era. Broadly defined, the post-network era of television began around 1986 when the Fox Network launched with a few hours of programming in a bid to become the fourth broadcast network (after DuMont’s failed bid in the 1940s-1950s). Roberta Pearson calls this period TVII, which dates roughly from the 1980s to the late 1990s and “is the era of channel/network

expansion, quality television, and network branding strategies.”⁵² Michele Hilmes suggests five factors made the climate ripe for the emergence of new networks: an expanding cable market; the impending expiration of Financial Interest and Syndication Rules (colloquially known as Fin/Syn); company mergers, synergies and acquisitions; expanding visibility of UHF channels; and competition for more independent stations.⁵³ Initially, Fox employed cream-skimming with its programming, a process whereby the network mostly broadcast in prime time, thus targeting “the richest part of the traditional network business.”⁵⁴ However, once the network moved to a more substantive programming schedule, its series were counter-programmed against the increasingly white fare on the three traditional networks.

Fox recognized an absence of black television representation as the major three networks - ABC, CBS, and NBC - became whiter (in terms of their series’ casts) in the 1980s. As Donald Bogle argues, during the 1980s, the major networks aired fewer black-cast series than they had in previous decades.⁵⁵ Although the major networks had black-cast hits like *Diff’rent Strokes* (ABC, 1978-1985), *Benson* (ABC, 1979-1986), *Gimme A Break* (NBC, 1981-1987), *Webster* (ABC, 1983-1987), *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-1992), *227* (NBC, 1985-1990), *Amen* (NBC, 1986-1991), and *A Different World* (NBC, 1987-1993), for many black viewers, these programs did not ring true to their

⁵² Roberta Pearson, “Cult Television as Digital Television’s Cutting Edge,” in *Television as Digital Media*, ed. James Bennett and Niki Strange. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 107.

⁵³ Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013), 336.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 337.

⁵⁵ Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Gould, 2001), 251.

experiences. Jannette Dates suggests that *Benson* “fit the pattern that scripted African American male characters as innocuous true-believers in the system, who supported, defended, and nurtured mainstream, middle class values, concerns, and even faults”⁵⁶ before suggesting Nell Carter’s character on *Gimme A Break* “continued the theme started by the proud but servile, cocky but nurturing, loyal mammies in the many Hollywood film classics and carried into the Eisenhower era by television’s *Beulah*.”⁵⁷ Additionally, in their reception study of *The Cosby Show*, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis acknowledge that some critics believed “the Huxtables’ charmed life [was] so alien to the experience of most black people that they [were] no longer ‘black’ at all.”⁵⁸

While the major networks were getting whiter in terms of their narrative content, black culture was slowly becoming part of “mainstream” culture. After its hesitation to air music videos by black artists, MTV launched *Yo! MTV Raps* (1988-1995), which was designed as a program that would feature the music videos of rap artists who were growing in popularity with its target young adult male audience. *Yo! MTV Raps* signaled a mainstream adaptation of rap music and style in many ways. It is important to briefly note the socio-cultural conditions from which hip hop emerges. During the late 1970s and 1980s, manufacturing jobs, which had been the source of many African Americans ascent into the middle class, began disappearing, black people were being incarcerated at alarming rates, and drugs, specifically crack cocaine, with its relative inexpensiveness,

⁵⁶ Jannette L. Dates, “Commercial Television,” in *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media*, ed. Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1993), 295.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁵⁸ Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 2-3.

was becoming the drug of choice for some African Americans.⁵⁹ Much of the rap music that emerges in this period is a response to these socio-cultural conditions. However, as cultural appropriation is wont to do, the mass mediation of hip hop engages only with the style, not necessarily the substance, of the music and culture. As the first successful fourth network, Fox began its foray into broadcasting by featuring programs with black bodies and sometimes black writing staff and producers, and its series gestured toward the growing import of rap and hip hop culture. Among these series were *In Living Color*, *Martin* (1992-1997), *The Sinbad Show* (1993-1994), and *Living Single* (1993-1998). Each series not only drew from hip hop culture (often in the look and feel of the opening credits and the series' theme song) but also drew talent from HBO's *Def Comedy Jam* (1992-1997), which came to be known as fertile ground for some of the leading black stand-up comics of the day. Ultimately, as *In Living Color* creator Keenan Ivory Wayans details, when Fox greenlit the show it was understood that it would be "a funky fresh approach to the variety-show last updated in the seventies by [*Saturday Night Live*]." ⁶⁰ The influx of black-cast shows at Fox, also led to a corresponding influx of black television writers and producers who could bring a "funky fresh" approach to the series that (presumably) white writers and producers could not. Using this formula to attract black and urban audiences, by 1993, when Fox began broadcasting seven days a week, it "was airing the single largest crop of black-produced shows in television history." ⁶¹

⁵⁹ Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 89.

⁶⁰ Nelson George, *The Authorized Companion to In Living Color: The Fox TV Series* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), 3

⁶¹ Zook, *Color By Fox*, 4.

While these series tapped into black music culture, they were also predicated on heterosexuality. Even as Martin Lawrence on his eponymous series played female characters in drag including his sassy neighbor Shenanah and his mother Mrs. Payne, the understanding is that Martin is “dressing up” rather than expressing a deep-seated desire to become a transwoman. His drag performances are shored up within the series by his heterosexual relationship with his girlfriend/fiancé/wife Gina.

In addition, I argue that the HIV/AIDS epidemic helped to construct the parameters within which black telesexuality was constructed. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported the first official documented case of AIDS on June 5, 1981.⁶² However, President Ronald Reagan did not publicly mention the disease until May 31, 1987.⁶³ While the disease initially was considered the “gay man’s disease” (its initial name was GRID – Gay Related Immune Deficiency), the disease soon began affecting black communities, gay and otherwise. However, as Cathy J. Cohen details, even as black people were being affected by the disease, “African Americans with relative privilege made their own distinctions between ‘good and moral’ black people and those deemed unworthy or ‘tainted’ by outside evils. Code words like *junkie*, *faggot*, *punk*, and *prostitute* were deployed both inside and outside of black communities to designate who was expendable.”⁶⁴ This “privileged black response” to HIV/AIDS structured the television industrial response to black representation. Put simply, junkies, faggots, punks

⁶² Larry Gross, *Up from Visibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 95.

⁶³ Allen White, “Reagan’s AIDS Legacy/ Silence Equals Death,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, June 8, 2004, accessed January 13, 2015, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2004/06/08/EDG777163F1.DTL>.

⁶⁴ Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*, 90.

and prostitutes were only employed within the black-cast sitcom in “very special episodes” where they were deployed to teach the audience a lesson.

By 1995, the Fox network, once home to the single largest crop of black television series, had cancelled four of its six black productions, *The Sinbad Show*, *Roc*, *South Central* and *In Living Color*, leaving *Martin* and *Living Single* as the only two representations of blackness on the network. In place of these black-cast series were white-centric series like *Party of Five* (1994-2000) and *Strange Luck* (1995-1996). As Kristal Brent Zook details, this was part of the “Fox formula,” a formula by which the network wooed black viewers with focused content in order to attract advertisers and then slowly mainstreamed (read: whitened) its programs.⁶⁵ However, although Fox had dropped the representational ball, they had created a successful template for other networks to follow.

In 1995, the newly launched Warner Bros. network (the WB) and United Paramount Network (UPN) began broadcasting, a first in broadcast history that was made possible by the 1995 repeal of Fin/Syn, which, in part, had been designed to limit the number of programs a network could own. Although both new networks were studio-backed, the WB was a slow-starter. According to Susanne Daniels and Cynthia Littleton, the WB’s “premiere-night numbers had barely registered on the national radar... [while] UPN’s premiere had been impressive by any network’s standards.”⁶⁶ Although they each had varying degrees of success initially, both networks entered the marketplace with a

⁶⁵ Zook, *Color By Fox*, 10.

⁶⁶ Susanne Daniels and Cynthia Littleton, *Season Finale: The Unexpected Rise and Fall of the WB and UPN* (New York: Harper Books, 2007), 9.

number of shows featuring black casts, as the Fox network had done upon its initial launch. Bogle argues that “programmers at these two new networks were aware that shows designed for African American audiences appealed not only to Black and urban viewers... but often to a young white audience too.”⁶⁷ In this way, these new netlets could kill two demographic birds with one stone. However, Kelly Cole documents that UPN had a problematic relationship to its branding as a “black network” because its executives thought it too limiting.⁶⁸ Ultimately, they followed the money and, at least initially, provided programming that appealed to black and urban audience segments, both underserved demographics by the four major networks. So, while the other networks, including Fox, largely rid their schedules of black programming, the WB and UPN doubled down on black-/youth-focused programming. For every series the WB had like *The Parent ‘Hood* (1995-1999) and *The Steve Harvey Show* (1996-2002), UPN had *Moesha* (1996-2001), *Malcolm & Eddie* (1996-2000) and *Sparks* (1996-1998). The WB also picked up “low-rated” network series like *Sister, Sister* (ABC, 1994-1995) and *For Your Love* (NBC, 1998) to augment existing black programming on their schedules. While NBC canceled *For Your Love* because of low ratings, its 6.7 rating/11 share was potential music to the WB’s ears.⁶⁹

The same year UPN and the WB launched, Ron Becker argues the networks entered a phase of full-fledged acceptance and representation of gay and lesbian

⁶⁷ Bogle, *Prime Time Blues*, 430.

⁶⁸ Kelly Cole, *From Homeboys to Girl Power: Media Mergers, Emerging Networks and 1990s Television* (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2005), 133.

⁶⁹ Lotz, “Segregated Sitcoms,” 140.

characters on television.⁷⁰ These representations were no longer considered toxic and, in fact, could draw liberal viewers who wanted to demonstrate their “coolness” by consuming televisual content with gay and lesbian characters. While neither UPN nor the WB launched series that either starred or featured recurring gay or lesbian characters of any race, UPN would ultimately test those waters. In 1996, the network debuted the sitcom *Moesha*, starring pop star Brandy Norwood, which became the network’s first bonafide hit. Demetrius Bady, a writer on the series believes that because of the network’s logic about black viewers, only singers were considered for the series’ titular character. “I read that script before they even got Brandy. I remember UPN would only pick it up if they got a singer... To this day we all know that if you’re going to get a show off the ground you have to have a singer.”⁷¹ This insistence on having a singer was, in some ways, rooted in the network’s desire for the series to appeal to a youthful demographic and for synergistic profits, but Brandy also allowed the series to have a dual appeal to both young viewers and black viewers as the then-current reigning princess of pop music. This synergy also gestures toward the ways that black music culture became integral to black television culture. As media scholar Timothy Havens summarizes, black-cast sitcoms in a post-*Cosby Show* era “often targeted cross-racial teenage and young adult audiences, typically by tapping into their shared interest in rap music and African American pop stars.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 158.

⁷¹ Demetrius Bady, Personal Interview, February 27, 2013.

⁷² Timothy J. Havens, *Black Television Travels: African American Media around the Globe* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 99.

While this expansion of original programming within the major broadcast networks was happening, cable networks were being launched to serve the seemingly ever-growing television appetite of American viewers, although cable programmers initially created a schedule filled with reruns.⁷³ New cable networks most regularly employ this model because of the relatively low cost of procuring existing material versus producing original content. However, the late 1990s and early 2000s were a far different time. As Pearson claims, this era, which she labels TVIII, begins in the late 1990s and is characterized by the proliferation of digital distribution platforms and models as well as further audience fragmentation.⁷⁴ With six major broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, UPN, and the WB), audiences were further fragmented by the availability of more channels and the lingering/continuing effects of the proliferation of home video/DVD, digital distribution platforms, and the “majors” were losing large chunks of viewers. Becker posits that by the early 1990s, the networks “saw their ad revenues and sense of invulnerability decline, [while] cable actually saw ad rates and revenues increase at double-digit rates.”⁷⁵ HBO intermittently produced original movies and series, but its importance as a source of original programming is often dated as 1999, when its series *The Sopranos* (1999 – 2007) won four primetime Emmy Awards. By the time the HBO series *Sex and the City* (1998 – 2004) won the Best Comedy Series Emmy in 2001, the “legacy” networks were on notice that cable was becoming a formidable

⁷³ Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 171.

⁷⁴ Pearson, “Cult Television,” 107.

⁷⁵ Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, 89-90.

competitor with respect to the production of original, “broadcast quality” programming.⁷⁶ By 2005 cable channels were “capturing over 50 percent of the daily viewing audience” as cable channels continued to proliferate and dissect the demographic pie into smaller and smaller pieces and increasingly creating original programming to fill their primetime schedules.⁷⁷

In 2006, UPN and the WB networks merged in 2006. Along with the merger, the network had to prune its combined series from 14 nights of programming (seven nights for each network) to seven nights of programming for the single, merged network. Only two black-cast sitcoms survived the merger: *Girlfriends* (UPN, 2000 – 2006; The CW, 2006-2008) and *Everybody Hates Chris* (UPN, 2005-2006; The CW, 2006-2009). By 2009, when *Everybody Hates Chris* was cancelled, the five major networks, ABC, CBS, the CW, Fox, and NBC largely broadcast white and/or multi-cultural cast series. This is the industrial and socio-cultural framework within which *Moesha*, *Good News*, *All of Us* and *Are We There Yet?* emerge.

⁷⁶ It is important to note that HBO largely steered away from black-cast television series although black actors and actresses were often part of the casts of some of its series including *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) and *The Wire* (2002-2008).

⁷⁷ Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect*, 388.

The Black Image in/from the White Mind: The Black-Cast Sitcom

Tricia Rose argues that “When we speak about the production of Black popular culture, we need to keep at least two kinds of questions in the foreground: the first has to do with Black aesthetics, style, and articulation, and the hybridization of Black practices; and the second involves the historical context for the creation, dissemination, and reception of Black popular forms.”⁷⁸ In the previous section, I touched on Rose’s first question. Here, I want to focus on the second question. More specifically, I want to focus on the historical context for the creation of television images. Zook details the unprecedented ways black writers and producers were utilized in the creation of black-cast television series of the mid-to-late-1990s such as *In Living Color*, *Living Single*, and *Moesha*, among others.⁷⁹ Zook argues that black writers and producers often exercised a significant degree of agency with respect to the series and scripts they created. However, as actor, writer and producer Tim Reid details, there is “always somebody else you’ve got to answer to in network television... There’s this guy and this guy’s boss. Then that division and that division’s boss. Then the network.”⁸⁰ As Reid underscores, the television production buck does not stop at the level of the series. And the further one moves from the series level, the less likely, particularly at the time when the series in this project were created, that an executive greenlighting a series will be black. In this way, many of the black-cast sitcoms that make it to air represent an *idea* of the black image

⁷⁸ Tricia Rose, “Black Texts/Black Contexts” in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 223.

⁷⁹ Zook, *Color By Fox*.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

within the white mind. Put more eloquently by James Baldwin, “This country’s image of the Negro, which hasn’t very much to do with the Negro, has never failed to reflect with a frightening accuracy the state of mind of the country.”⁸¹ What I point to here is that the black-cast sitcom is undergirded by the ideologies of the largely white television industry from which the black-cast sitcom is granted existence on the airwaves. This white hegemonic understanding (and often misunderstanding) of blackness often results in black-cast sitcom humor that is “based on race and is a parody of Blackness.”⁸²

Many black-cast series of the 1980s such as *Gimme A Break* (NBC, 1981-1987), *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975-1985), *Sanford and Son* (NBC, 1972-1977), *Webster* (ABC, 1983-1987; first-run syndication 1987-1989), *227* (NBC, 1985-1990), *He’s the Mayor* (ABC, 1986) and *What’s Happenin’ Now* (first-run syndication 1985-1988), were created by white showrunners and white studio executives, and employed few, if any, black writers. While the series certainly had black stars, few of these stars were exercising agency over the kinds of representations on the screen. As media scholar Christine Acham details, actors including Redd Foxx (*Sanford and Son*), Diahann Carol (*Julia*, NBC, 1968-1971) and Esther Rolle (*Good Times*, CBS, 1974-1979) were flexing their star power to correct the ways blackness was being imagined in white creators’ and producers’ minds.⁸³ However, these black stars were outliers as few black actors were allowed to be deeply involved with the production of the images they were mass-mediating.

⁸¹ James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 143.

⁸² Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy*, 68.

⁸³ Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 110-142.

The images of blackness they create and/or greenlight often originate from other media sources. Todd Gitlin argues that while “executives try to stay flexible... their flexibility is bounded by the conventional wisdom that circulates through their favored media. The periodicals put issues on their mental agenda.”⁸⁴ In other words, executives take the pulse of America from other media outlets that are also estimating America’s pulse. This is particularly problematic with respect to race. Recalling Gitlin’s earlier assertion that television executives receive information from a select few places, blackness becomes inextricably linked to anti-gay ideologies, a topic I will delve into later. As such, when black gay bodies are used in the black-cast sitcom, they are filtered through existing (il)logics. For these reasons, it is necessary to first discuss the ways that representations of blackness generally, and black masculinity specifically are undergirded by anti-gay sentiments. Given the imagined inextricable linkage of anti-gay sentiment among black cultures and the monolithic industrial imagining of blackness, these anti-gay ideologies come to represent black people.

Black Masculinity Mediated

As I have gestured toward, the ways that black masculinity is constructed in popular culture is important to this project as it helps to structure the parameters against which gayness exists. Black masculinity has been mediated in a number of ways. A black man can be portrayed as the butt of jokes, or the embodiment of fear and violence. He can be a sexless, harmless buffoon, or he can be an oversexed sexual predator. However,

⁸⁴ Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 204.

the one area that seems to be uncontested is that the mass mediated black man is heterosexual. Ronald L. Jackson and Celnisha L. Dangerfield assert “the public narratives pertaining to Black men's lives comply with several racialized social projections about the Black masculine body as (1) violent, (2) sexual, and (3) incompetent.”⁸⁵ While certainly reductive, the words violent and incompetent rarely, if ever, are ascribed “positive” connotations. And while being deemed sexual can be read as having far more “positive” connotations, when applied to black men, that sexuality is often construed as dangerous. Essentially, Jackson and Dangerfield are describing the “Brute” stereotype. The Brute was developed to serve three interrelated sets of discourses. First, as blackness (which is first and foremost connected to notions of Africanness) is constructed within discourses surrounding the North Atlantic slave trade, Africa is the place from whence the dark, animalistic “Other” originates. Within this primitive imagination of the African “Other” are also found imaginings of sexual savagery and uncontrollable sexual urges. Therefore, that sexualized other narrative leads to the second way in which black masculinity is constructed as dangerous. The sexual violation of black women by white men created an imagined “revenge” narrative in hegemonic white culture as black bodies were freed from the oppressions connected with slavery. By this logic, black men would want to seek interracial “revenge” on white men by sexually violating white women. Concomitantly, freeing slaves from captivity, particularly black men, meant that these men were counted as “men” and therefore would see themselves as equal to white men –

⁸⁵ Ronald L. Jackson and Celnisha L. Dangerfield, “Defining Black Masculinity as a Cultural Property: An Identity Negotiation Paradigm” in *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, ed. Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter (Florence, KY: Wadsworth Publishing, 2002), 123.

and therefore would “rightfully” have access to white women. Additionally, this animalism coupled with sexually indiscriminate behavior led to an understanding that for black men, sex is about fulfilling a sexual urge, not about procreation and raising a nuclear family within that unit. Lastly, the Black man’s “natural” abilities are corporeal, not cerebral – which is the domain of the white man. Thus, black men throughout slavery were in their “rightful place” as laborers while white people (and white men specifically) enjoyed the fruits of their hard labor. Most importantly, while black men were “naturally” positioned as subordinate to white men, they needed to be constructed as happy within the social order. These three intersecting nineteenth century discourses become the framework through which black masculinity is mass mediated. Importantly, dominant white hegemonic culture largely created these tropes, which were performed in minstrel shows by white men in blackface.

It is equally important to understand that black media producers re-inscribed these tropes and fed them to black consumers as a reclamation of dominant ideologies of blackness and black masculinity. Many of these black filmmakers took up and reclaimed the Brute as a symbol of black power. As black filmmakers in the 1970s began taking narrative control of the stories told about them, the Brute was reclaimed as a symbol of pride. No longer would black filmmakers allow sexual virility and violence to be construed as negative attributes. Instead, these (mostly male) filmmakers made films wherein black masculinity was celebrated. Kicking off with Melvin Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback’s Baaadasssss Song* (1971), Blaxploitation cinema was born and along with it, a new kind of cinematic black man. As the lyrics from the theme song to the film *Shaft*

(1971) indicate, the new cinematic black man was a “black private dick [who is] a sex machine with all the chicks.” To be an authentic black man is always to be in hot pursuit of sexual conquests with women – not men.

However, the Brute is not the only way that black men have historically been imaged. The Coon is the second of the twin pillars of the representation of black masculinity. The Coon was a characterization that demonstrated that black men were not smart enough to be able to self-govern, therefore slavery was the “proper place” for them to exist where they did not have to worry about “white men’s problems” like money, property and family. Michelle Wallace posits, “the Coon is happy-go-lucky, a clown, a buffoon, a child, clever and witty but unable to perform the most simple task without guidance. He’s a trickster, cunning and resourceful.”⁸⁶ It is important to note Wallace’s definition illuminates the slippery nature of depictions of the coon. He could certainly be an adult male, as Stepin Fetchit was, or he could be a child like Buckwheat in the *Our Gang* series of films (and later television series). Therefore, the characterization of the coon makes little differentiation between the adult black male and the black male child – at base, neither the black man nor the black male child were responsible enough to take care of their responsibilities. bell hooks makes an important intervention here: inextricably linked to the depiction of black men as being ill-equipped to care for their family is “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy’s refusal to allow black males full access to employment while offering black females a place in the service economy created a context where black males and females could not conform to standard sexist

⁸⁶ Michelle Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 1999), 25.

roles in regard to work even if they wanted to.”⁸⁷ This stereotype begins to suture together blackness with thievery, criminality and tricksterism. The coon is also problematic because, while he may be connected to tricksterism, criminality and thievery, he is comedic – and comedy largely remains the film and television genre in which black bodies most often appear.

Televisually, characters such as J.J. Evans on *Good Times* (1974-1979), George Jefferson on *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985), Will Smith on *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (1990-1996), and Martin Payne on *Martin* (1992-1997) have often been described as “Coons” – in a definition closely related to Wallace’s. However, each of these characters was linked romantically to a woman (or women) during their series’ runs. In this way, there may have been many things that were problematic about the ways these characters behaved, but they did not cross the greatest taboo – black gayness.

Several scholars have argued that a contemporary coon (or “Super Coon”) emerged with the Vh1 series *Flavor of Love* (2006-2009). Shannon B. S. Campbell and Steven S. Giannino argue that Flavor Flav, the series’ star, was “typecast in the same one-dimensional way as the coon of years past, and as such, he evokes and enacts many of the same troubling stereotypes.”⁸⁸ Similarly, Valerie Palmer-Mehta and Alina Haliliuc posit Flavor Flav is part of a kind of neo-minstrelsy by juxtaposing *Flavor of Love* with ABC’s *The Bachelor* (2002 -). The authors argue Flavor Flav “ghettoizes black masculinity,

⁸⁷ bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8.

⁸⁸ Shannon B. S. Campbell and Steven S. Giannino, “FLAAAAVVOOR-FLAAAV: Comic-Relief or Super Coon?” in *Masculinity in the Black Imagination: Politics of Communicating Race and Manhood*, ed. Ronald L. Jackson, II and Mark C. Hopson (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2011), 107.

making it seem different and exaggeratedly distanced from the white standard, placing it in its own separate box, rendering it unable to undermine... normative white masculinity.”⁸⁹ While these authors arguments may be convincing, Flavor Flav, in all of his minstrelsy/cooning, is in pursuit of heterosexual love. Even as the coon may bulge his eyes or be understood as a thief, he is always understood as heterosexual.

In a similar vein, more contemporary black films and music culture have taken the Brute and re-articulated him as an embodiment of “authentic black masculinity.” hooks argues “popular culture tells young black males that only the predator will survive.”⁹⁰ In the films in what has been called New Black Cinema including *Boyz in the Hood* (dir. John Singleton, 1991) and *Malcolm X* (dir. Spike Lee, 1992), Chon Noriega posits that characters are featured “that oppose, flourish, or are assimilated into the political and social climate of poverty, crime, drugs, and violence, all of which are generally emplaced within the spatial confines of the inner-city projects or the ghetto.”⁹¹ As Noriega implicitly suggests poverty, crime, drugs, violence and the ghetto become the signifiers of “black authenticity.” Keith M. Harris asserts for John Singleton’s *Boyz in the Hood* (1991), Doughboy (played by Ice Cube) begins the film as less than a black man, but in the process of “avenging his brother’s murder, [he] redeems black masculinity” which, at

⁸⁹ Valerie Palmer-Mehta and Alina Haliluc, “*Flavor of Love* and the Rise of Neo-Minstrelsy on Reality Television” in *Pimps, Wimps, Studs, Thugs and Gentlemen: Essays on Media Images of Masculinity*, ed. Elwood Watson (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2009), 101.

⁹⁰ hooks, *We Real Cool*, 27.

⁹¹ Chon Noriega, “The Construction of Black Male Identity in Black Action Films of the Nineties,” *Cinema Journal* 37, no. 2 (1998): 36.

its core, is about “the representation of black women and the family and family values.”⁹²

The invocation of “family values” stands in for heterosexuality. Black gayness (or gayness generally) is never considered within the realm of an “authentic black masculinity.” This is not to suggest that black gayness never appears in black media and popular culture. While black gay characters have played minor roles in film including *Sweet Sweetback*, *Friday Foster* (1975), *Car Wash* (1976), and *House Party* (1990), among others, these films construct black gayness as improper and existing outside of the confines of “authentic” black masculinity. In addition, these caricatures of black gayness are positioned as permissible sites for humor.

This anti-gay stance is more clearly articulated in black music culture where some rappers’ lyrics, including Ice Cube, Beanie Sigel, Common, and Boogie Down Production, among others, explicitly express their disdain for gayness. In these black cultural products, black gayness is positioned as an image that can be ridiculed without repercussions. This understanding of black gayness among an imagined monolithic black culture helps to underscore the differences in the ways that television has treated black gayness. In the next section, I turn to this body of research to examine the ways white gayness and black gayness have developed within television discourses.

Representing Black Gayness and White Gayness: A Tale of Two Televisual Sexualities in Sitcoms

When people talk about gayness on television, what they tend to mean is white

⁹² Keith M. Harris, *Boys, Boyz, Boiz: An Ethics of Black Masculinity in Film and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 93.

gayness. This section demonstrates that when people talk about gayness on television (or even gayness on sitcoms) as a monolithic thing, they lose the specificity of what they really want to say. That black gayness and white gayness in black-cast and white-/multi-cultural cast sitcoms have developed differently should come as no surprise. However, when media scholars turn their attention to gayness on television, they often flatten out gayness and television and continue to exnominate whiteness.

Gayness in the sitcom began on mostly the same ground in the 1970s, racially speaking. Prior to the 1970s, representations of gay men had been largely mass-mediated using techniques associated with gender inversion. Put another way, gay men in media were largely depicted as feminine and employed in “women’s professions” like cosmetology and interior design. The Stonewall Riots in June 1969 not only marked the beginning of the modern gay rights movement, but also marked a broader inclusion of gay men and lesbians on television.⁹³

At the same time, Stonewall coincided with television’s attempt to rehabilitate its image by taking, what is now widely known as a turn to relevance, whereby television shows began to deal with social issues. Former CBS president Robert D. Wood engineered this turn to relevance because he thought television should “shift from cornball comedy to expressions—however ambiguous—of liberal ideas.”⁹⁴ This turn to relevance included series (or individual episodes) of sitcoms that addressed

⁹³ For a broader history of the Stonewall Riots, see Martin Bauml Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Penguin, 1994) and David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked a Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004). For a deeper history of gay televisual representation immediately following the Stonewall Riots, see Tropiano, *The Prime Time Closet* and Capsuto, *Alternate Channels*.

⁹⁴ Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, 206.

race, class, gender, and the generation gap via series such as *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-1979), *Maude* (CBS, 1972-1978), and *Good Times* (CBS, 1974-1979). In addition, issues about gay men and lesbians appeared in episodes *All in the Family*, *Maude* and *Room 222* (ABC, 1969-1974) that began to be constructed as attempts at “positive” representations. These representations included white gay men who did not demonstrate markers of homosexuality that had long been associated with gayness. These white gay men were not feminine, nor did they have jobs in hegemonically “feminine careers.” I call this set of characters “educative gay characters.” I term these white gay men as such because their primary purpose was to educate mainstream culture about gayness and attempt to demonstrate that not all white gay men were flamboyant. As would also become the norm for televisual representations of gay men and lesbians, once this issue was “tackled” in an episode, the gay character was never heard from again. In this way, the main heterosexual characters can be constructed as “liberal” on gay issues without having to deal with the baggage of gayness on a weekly basis. In 1970s television, it seemed, as Chuck Hoy asserts, “as if television program creators were attempting to instruct the American public in Homosexuality 101.”⁹⁵ The educative gay character largely remains the dominant model for episodic or recurring gay characters.

The educative gay character was not the only way that white-cast television featured white gay characters in the 1970s. These educative gay characters were soon joined by a gay characterization Tropiano calls the “sissy regular” – a character who is

⁹⁵ Phyllis A. Johnson and Michael C. Keith, *Queer Airwaves: The Story of Gay and Lesbian Broadcasting*. (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), 145.

a co-star or series regular on a sitcom and embodies stereotypically feminine behaviors.⁹⁶ ABC was the first network to feature a gay sissy regular on its show *The Corner Bar* (1972-1973). While the series was undoubtedly groundbreaking (particularly for the era in which it occurred), the series was not without its problems. Because this character, Peter Panama, was not going to simply “drop in” on the show, the network and writers needed to figure out how to make such a characterization palatable for its presumed heterosexual viewership.⁹⁷ Much to the ire of many gay rights organizations, the solution was to make Peter a slightly updated version of the “lavender gentleman,” a radio creation known for his coded homosexuality via mannerisms and modes of speech.⁹⁸

Two years after the failure of *The Corner Bar*, Norman Lear’s T.A.T. Communications entered the gay programming fray with two sissy regulars on *Hot l Baltimore* (ABC, 1975). The series featured two “bickering queens” who were in a long-term relationship and residents of the *Hot l Baltimore* (the “e” had burned out on the residential hotel’s sign and had never been replaced). However, the series that would put the sitcom’s sissy regular on the map premiered in 1977. ABC’s *Soap* (1977-1981) featured Billy Crystal’s portrayal of Jodie, as a gay man who wants to undergo a sex change in order to be with his partner, a closeted professional football player. Even

⁹⁶ Tropiano, *The Prime Time Closet*.

⁹⁷ I will return to this topic in Chapter 3 with respect to black gayness, audiences and production.

⁹⁸ Matthew Murray, “‘The Tendency to Corrupt and Deprave Morals’: Regulation and Irregular Sexuality in Golden Age Radio Comedy,” in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 135.

before the first episode aired, the network received 32,000 letters demanding the show's cancellation, mostly from people who had yet to see an episode of the show.

While white gay men were being included in series as co-stars and recurring characters as both sissy regulars and educative gay characters, black gayness did not emerge on television until 1977. The short-lived *Sanford Arms* (NBC, 1977) concerned the proprietors of Sanford Arms, a local bed and breakfast owned and operated by *Sanford & Son*'s Aunt Esther, played by LaWanda Page. While the series was canceled after four episodes because of poor ratings, it is an important series because it featured an episode that included Travis, a black gay character. Travis drew on a broader move to remove femininity as a stereotypical marker of gayness from one-off characters in television – a strategy seen in other “relevance” programming of the 1970s including the 1972 *All in the Family* episode, “Judging Books by Covers.” In this way, Travis can be described as an educative gay character.

From the 1980s until the mid-1990s, white-cast sitcoms would vacillate between educative gay characters and sissy regulars. When the Gay 90s hit television (which also coincided with the short-lived success of New Queer Cinema), a hybrid white gay character emerged. This hybrid character embodied many of the characteristics of the educative gay character, namely his masculinity. But unlike the educative gay character, he was a series regular or star. I call this wave of white gay characters the “respectable gays.” Within this discourse of respectable gays are five general characteristics of gay men in film, which build upon Rodger Streitmatter's

work on gay representation with slight modifications for television.⁹⁹ In order for white gay representations to be understood as respectable gays they must be series regulars or co-stars and fit into at least two of the following assumptions: 1) gay men are charming, 2) gay men are physically attractive; 3) gay men have taste; 4) gay men are successful; and 5) gay men are chaste. White-cast sitcoms like *Will & Grace* (NBC, 1998-2006), *Normal, Ohio* (FOX, 2000), and *Some of My Best Friends* (CBS, 2001) attempted to capitalize on the new “gay chic” for what Becker calls socially liberal, urban-minded professionals (or the SLUMPY) demographic.¹⁰⁰ These series regulars/co-stars/stars were masculine, single, and moderately well adjusted within mainstream (read: white) heteronormative culture. These characterizations very clearly mirrored the educative gay character who was still in circulation as a one-off representation of gayness within some white-cast and black-cast sitcoms.

The next wave of white gay characterizations for series stars and co-stars emerged toward the end of *Will & Grace*’s successful run – the “homonormative gays.” These characters are still “respectable;” however they are most often in long-term relationships. Described by *Los Angeles Times* writer Don Kilhefner, homonormative gays are defined by a model of gay assimilation that includes “a married [gay] couple with a home, a child or two and a schedule of PTA meetings and ballet lessons (for the child), a dog, a parrot, a few goldfish and tickets to a fundraising dinner at the Beverly Hilton” – or no different from the socially constructed image of a

⁹⁹ Rodger Streitmatter, *From ‘Perverts’ to ‘Fab Five’: The Media’s Changing Depiction of Gay Men and Lesbians* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 95-100.

¹⁰⁰ Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*.

heterosexual married couple.¹⁰¹ The poster representation for this kind of televisual white gayness can be seen in *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009 -), and *The New Normal* (NBC, 2012-2013). Walters argues, “In this era of liberal gay visibility, contemporary culture has other motifs to choose from, and the coming-out story no longer represents both the beginning and the end of how gay identity is imagined in popular media.”¹⁰² Walter’s assertion appears to be valid for white-cast sitcoms when they feature black gay characters. White-cast sitcoms tend to subscribe to post-racial and post-gay ideologies. These ideologies suggest that both race and gayness no longer matter as axes of difference and we are all simply human. These presumptions manifest themselves in the rare instance that black gay characters appear in white-/multi-cultural cast sitcoms by engaging in little, if any, discussion of their blackness or gayness. Examples include *Spin City* (ABC, 1996-2002), *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (Fox, 2013 -), and *Sirens* (USA, 2013 -), which fit within the respectable gay model, and *Don’t Trust the B**** in Apartment 23* (ABC, 2012-2013), which employed the sissy regular model. As I will demonstrate in the next section of this chapter, while white gay men in white-cast sitcoms have become post-gay (which implicitly gestures toward a post-coming-out state of being), that move has not been extended to black gay men in black-cast sitcoms, the focus of this project.

¹⁰¹ Don Kilhefner, “Gay—Is the New Straight—I Don’t Think So!,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 5, 2007, accessed January 15, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-w-kilhefner5dec05,0,2467579.story>

¹⁰² Suzanna Danuta Walters, *The Tolerance Trap: How God, Genes, and Good Intentions are Sabotaging Gay Equality* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 36.

When examining the representational landscape of black gay characters in black-cast sitcoms, there is a very different history. There have only been 27 episodes since 1977 that included such characters (see Appendix B). While black gays have appeared across a plethora of series and broadcast eras, they have remained narratively and industrially trapped in the educative gay model. From the first black gay character on the short-lived *Sanford Arms* to the multi-episode arc on *Let's Stay Together* (BET, 2012 -), these black gay men are narratively charged with educating the characters within the series as well as the audience about gayness. Once that lesson has been delivered, there is no narrative utility for the character and he can be discarded.

As *Trapped in a Generic Closet* will explore, these educative gays can take on several forms. Often, these characters' function within their respective series is to educate its (presumably black) audience about homosexuality while concomitantly reifying hegemonic black masculinity. Because of this overarching narrative function, coupled with the imagination of black audiences as less liberal/more anti-gay than white audiences, the television industry appears to be suggesting that black-cast sitcoms are not ready for a recurring black gay character. This industry lore about black viewers shapes "what gets produced as well as how, where, and when productions get watched."¹⁰³ *Trapped in a Generic Closet* examines not only what is produced but also how those whom black-cast sitcoms with black gay characters claim to represent watch and make meaning from these representations. Examining the black-cast sitcom and its engagement with black gayness tells a very different tale

¹⁰³ Havens, *Black Television Travels*, 4.

about gay representation on television.

Methodology

The overarching research question that drives *Trapped in a Generic Closet* is: How do production, post-production and audience reception help to make meaning with respect to images of black gay men in black-cast sitcoms? To answer this broad question, I undertake a circuit of media approach to examine the various sites where meaning is produced and made. Julie D'Acci notes “some analyses [tend to] overlook the conditions and specific shaping forces of production; the conditions and intricacies of reception; and ... the specificities of the televisual form (from narrative structure to genre to the operations of televisual techniques)” which results in analyses that do not fully consider the multiple spaces where meaning can be made.¹⁰⁴ *Trapped in a Generic Closet* attempts to heed D'Acci's warning by examining aspects of production, post-production, and audience reception for episodes of black-cast sitcoms with black gay characters in order to more fully understand the ways these representations are created and “live” in the world of television entertainment. Additionally, *Trapped in a Generic Closet* is broadly conceptualized as a queer of color critique of the black-cast sitcom. Building upon Roderick A. Ferguson who posits “queer of color analysis extends women of color feminism by investigating how intersecting racial, gender, and sexual practices

¹⁰⁴ Julie D'Acci, “Cultural Studies, Television Studies, and the Crisis in the Humanities,” in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, ed. Lynn Spiegel and Jan Olsson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 422.

antagonize and/or conspire with the normative investments of nation-states and capital,” this dissertation seeks to extend this critique to media, namely the black-cast sitcom, and the ways that it has historically made and circumscribed spaces for black gayness within its normative ranks.¹⁰⁵ *Trapped in a Generic Closet* does not attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of all of the gay black characters that have ever appeared on television (a project that should be undertaken). Rather, taking a critical cultural studies approach, I am interested in the black gay characters that appear in the black-cast sitcom and how they function within the black-cast sitcom form, how they function alongside hegemonic notions of black masculinity, and how they operate within queer politics of respectability. As I mentioned previously, I operationalize the black-cast sitcom as a comedic television series on American television featuring a primarily black-cast, similarly to the approach taken by Robin R. Means Coleman and Charlton D. McIlwain. As such, gay black characters on sitcoms with primarily white casts, including Carter Heywood on *Spin City*, Calvin Owen on *Greek* (ABC Family, 2007-2011), and Luther Wilson on *Don’t Trust the B**** in Apartment 23*, and gay black characters in primarily white-cast dramas including Keith Charles on *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001-2005), Lafayette Reynolds on *True Blood* (HBO, 2008-2014), or Kadrick King and Tariq Muhammad on *L.A. Complex* (The CW, 2012), will not be part of this study.

There have been no sustained images of black gay men in black-cast sitcoms, which makes this type of study impossible to conduct at the time of this writing, but *Trapped in a Generic Closet* is also implicitly concerned with the industry lore that

¹⁰⁵ Roderick A Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 4.

leaves black gay male characters trapped in prescribed roles within the black-cast sitcom. Additionally, *Trapped in a Generic Closet* intervenes and works against the scholarly impetus to study only lead and co-starring characters because they have more sustained visibility with viewers and instead examines one-off (and nearly one-off) gay black male characters within the black-cast sitcom because, I argue, they reveal as much and sometimes more about the ways in which ideology functions within the genre, particularly with respect to black viewers. It is within the moments of rupture that gay black guest-starring characters emerge that viewers can understand what the shows' producers and writers (as a monolithic group) think about gayness and its intersection with comedy. *Trapped in a Generic Closet* also works against a presentist inclination whereby the shows studied are the ones that are either popular and/or designated as the "quality" television show of the moment. Popular and quality shows certainly have their space and place within media studies; however, black shows are rarely deemed "quality enough" (which often means a failure to appeal to an imagined "white sensibility") to warrant much scholarly attention.

Methodologically, the texts/episodes chosen for this study were selected in three ways. First, building upon research by Tropiano, Capsuto and Becker, I gathered episodes of black-cast sitcoms between 1977 and 2010 that featured black gay characters on black-cast sitcoms. Second, I searched guides to locate episodes these authors may have missed because they were not specifically focused on gay black men or the black-cast sitcom and/or because their research was conducted before certain series/episodes aired. Third, I pared down the list based upon those episodes that featured black gay characters in a role

that served a narrative function. For instance, an episode of the series *Martin* (FOX, 1992-1997), “DMV Blues,” was excluded because the gay black character is primarily in the background and delivers one line that is ultimately tertiary to the central plotline. In addition, the *Cosby* (NBC, 1996 - 2000) episode “Older and Out,” was excluded because the black gay character does not provide any of the narrative thrust for the episode (rather it is a white gay character who does so). In addition, series that featured episodes concerning characters thinking another character is gay, or those episodes that feature a character pretending to be gay, were excluded. When applying that criterion, two episodes of *Tyler Perry’s For Better or Worse* (TBS, 2011 – 2013; OWN, 2013 -) were excluded because one episode, “The Will and the Grace,” dealt with a character who alleged he was gay in order to become romantically closer to the series’ female protagonist. Additionally, the episode “Tommy” from *Tyler Perry’s For Better or Worse* was excluded because it did not feature a gay character, rather the suspicion that a character might be gay because his mother caught him wearing her makeup. The *Guys Like Us* episode, “In and Out,” and the *For Your Love* episode, “House of Cards,” were removed because characters were pretending to be gay. Based on this set of criteria, four series were selected for this study: *Moesha* (UPN, 1996 - 2001), *Good News* (UPN, 1997 - 1998), *All of Us* (UPN, 2003 – 2006; The CW, 2006-2007), and *Are We There Yet?* (TBS, 2010 - 2012). These series were selected for two reasons. First, they provide examples of the ways television generally, and black-cast sitcoms specifically, developed in the late 1990s through the 2010s, particularly in relationship to black gayness. These series provide an exemplary snapshot of the beginning of UPN’s engagement with black

viewership, the end of UPN's existence, and the rise of black-cast programming on cable. Second, the writers of the episodes of the selected series that featured black gay characters were still alive (which was not the case for *Sanford Arms* and *Roc*) and, moreover, willing to speak candidly with me with respect to the cultural work they accomplished in their episodes. In contrast to those writers whose interviews provided the framework for Chapter 3 of this project, writers remain afraid to discuss what happens in the writers' room for fear of being unable to work again because they have revealed the inner workings of a "sacred" space.

Rather than focus on stereotypes, particularly as they related to the representations of blackness and gayness, this project is concerned with the ways these axes of identity ideologically circulate within the black-cast sitcom. Following Foucault, the bulk of this dissertation utilizes discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is most concerned with the ways individuals talk about other people and objects and seeks to classify, describe and define them. Implicit in this definition is that discourse circulates within/and because of hegemonic power. As Foucault asserts, "power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another, that there is no power relations without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations."¹⁰⁶ In this way, *Trapped in a Generic Closet* seeks to understand the ways that systems of power produce ideologies

¹⁰⁶ Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 27.

about black gayness and the relationship that knowledge production has to black gay audience reception, production, comedy, and black masculinity.

Trapped in a Generic Closet employs various methodologies to explore the sites where meaning is made within production (television writing), post-production (laugh track), and audience reception rooted within a series of intermediary questions. The first intermediary question is how are images of black gay men encoded at the point of their creation? This question is answered via in-depth qualitative interviews with television writers. Through Kim Myers, Director of Diversity for the Writer's Guild of America West, I interviewed four writers who wrote episodes of the series chosen for the case studies. The list of series to be analyzed in depth was narrowed to four. Writers who worked on *Moesha*, *Good News*, *All of Us* and *Are We There Yet?* were interviewed via telephone, with interviews tape recorded and transcribed, to discuss their experiences writing gay black characters for their respective series. Following Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model, this phase of the research aims to determine the ways particular ideologies are reified via the social norms of commercial network television narratives and encoded when writers are writing black gay characters.

The second intermediary question *Trapped in a Generic Closet* asks is: in what ways can nonverbal communication forms, like the laugh track, signal an ideological relationship to black gayness in black-cast sitcoms? Using the same four series, I examine the laugh track from within humor theory. Within this analysis, I consider the laugh track as part of the post-production process because while some of the series were filmed in front of a live studio audience, laughter and the laugh track can be moved around in post-

production. An examination of these series provides a clear ideological link between what the producers of each series believe to be humorous.

The third intermediary question is how do black gay men respond to and make meaning of fictional televisual representations of gay black men? This intervention in the scholarship is important because almost no studies have focused on this group of viewers. There is certainly merit in gauging the reception of other viewers, perhaps heterosexual black men, or gay white men, and comparing and contrasting the ways in which these groups make meaning vis-à-vis black gay male representation. However, this research is predicated on letting the voices of black gay men be heard without having to draw differences or similarities in their meaning-making process with other viewers to validate the “realness” of their reception processes. To that end, I employed in-depth interviews as a primary methodology. The sample of 10 self-identified black gay men currently residing in Detroit and Chicago were recruited via snowball sampling techniques. The sample size was selected for two reasons. First, by employing more ethnographic methodologies, I engaged more deeply with a smaller pool of respondents. The average interview length was 90 minutes for the respondents. By talking with these men for longer periods of time (and conducting follow-up interviews for both clarification and to respond to criticisms and counterpoints raised by other subjects), the data is likely richer than if I had conducted more interviews that were shorter in length. Second, this dissertation does not seek to create a set of data that can be extrapolated across all black gay men (or even all black gay men in Detroit or Chicago). Rather, this data is specific to the men who participated in this study.

Before the interviews, each subject was asked to view five, approximately 30-minute episodes of one of the television series chosen for in-depth analysis; as described above, those series included *Moesha*, *Good News*, *All of Us* (two episodes), and *Are We There Yet?*. The episodes were provided via a password-protected link on YouTube two weeks prior to the scheduled interview. The interviews were then tape-recorded and transcribed. To ensure anonymity, after transcription, audio recordings were destroyed, and the transcripts are currently kept in a locked filing cabinet to which only I have the key.

Respondents were asked to respond to 36 open-ended questions (see Appendix C) that covered 1) demographic information; 2) familiarity with the television shows under interrogation; 3) perceived ideology and interpretations of the episodes viewed; 4) television texts not screened that respondents remember for gay black characters; 5) texts and characters respondents may have “queered” in the absence of gay black characters.

Methodologically I employed in-depth interviews rather than focus groups or group interviews in this project for two reasons: first, within focus groups and group interviews, there can be dominant voices that either monopolize the conversation or inadvertently steer conversation in particular directions. My hope is that doing one-on-one in-depth interviews provided more open, thorough and honest discussion from respondents. By conducting follow-up interviews with respondents based on other interviews, the theory is that this will provide some of the conversation that might have occurred in a group setting but in a safer environment where respondents will feel free to agree or disagree. Second, although the men I interviewed are self-identified gay men,

there may still be trepidation among these men in talking about issues related to sexuality. Therefore, a one-on-one interview was utilized to potentially make respondents more comfortable than they might be in a group setting, particularly because both the respondents and the interviewer were black, gay and male.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1 utilizes production studies to examine the ways black gay characters are written for black-cast sitcoms. The interviews with writers that form the basis for this chapter seek to understand the ways cultural and industrial forces operate within episodes of black-cast sitcoms featuring gay black characters. In addition, this chapter examines when and on what television series black and gay writers find work and how that factors into the construction of an American imaginary through television. In this chapter, I pay particular attention to the ways controlling images of black gay men in television shape the ways writers craft their episodes and the level of agency they are afforded as they write.

Chapter 2 focuses on post-production in relation to humor theory and representation. Drawing from sitcom genre theory, television sound studies and humor theory, this chapter examines the ways comedy marks black gay bodies as “the comic.” This chapter argues that the laugh track, as an electronic substitute for the “audience,” instructs at-home audiences about how they should view homosexuality, irrespective of

the message the script itself seeks to convey. In this chapter, I argue that the laugh track works to create a heterosexual “us” vs. the Other “them,” particularly with respect to the “proper” performance of black masculinity.

Chapter 3 builds upon Chapters 1 and 2 through a reception study and specifically answers, how do black gay men understand fictional televisual representations of black gay men in black-cast sitcoms? Specifically, the black gay men in this study engage with their understanding of stereotypes, controlling images and the uses of the laugh track vis a vis black gay representation. While the men certainly read the episodes of black-cast sitcoms with black gay characters in negotiated ways, the ways they achieve this negotiation are fascinating. Particularly, this chapter illuminates their difficult and negotiated relationship to historical stereotypes of black gay men and acknowledges these viewers as post-modern subjects who are not only interested in the text, but are aware of the ways series can gesture toward preferred meanings via the use of the laugh track. Within this broader analysis, I also examine what black gay men might change about particular representations as well as their responses to the ways writers think about gay storylines and black gay characters.

Finally, I conclude by drawing linkages between the various sites where meaning is made and speculate on how my findings illuminate the conditions under which black gay representation in black-cast sitcom exists in this cultural moment. Specifically, I ask, does the “generic closet” still exist within the black-cast sitcom post-2010? I also speculate on the ways that the black-cast sitcom can emerge from its “generic closet” with respect to black gay representation.

Chapter One: Scripting the Black Gay Male in Black-Cast Sitcoms

George Balanchine has historically received credit for the ways he shaped ballet in the twentieth century. His great ballets, including *Apollo* (1928), *Serenade* (1934), *The Four Temperaments* (1946), *Agon* (1957), and *Stars and Stripes* (1958), literally and figuratively changed the face of ballet, not just in the United States, but the world over. However, Mr. B (as Balanchine is affectionately called) would not have been as great had he not been surrounded by a number of other artists, including but not limited to composers, dancers, lighting designers, and costumer designers. In other words, as much as the movement and the placement of the dancers' bodies came from Mr. B's mind, without these other key players, there would likely be no "great Balanchine ballets." The music guided the ways Mr. B choreographed movement and placed bodies; the dancers learned and embodied the movement, taking special care to be in the right place at the right time; the lighting designer adequately captured the mood of the ballet to ensure that a ballet meant to be sad is not lit too brightly; and the costume designer created costumes that not only showcased the movement but also captured its mood and style. If we think about ballet in cinematic terms, these are the elements of balletic mise-en-scène: the dancers, music, lighting and costumes all come together to form the visual picture the choreographer is attempting to convey.

While Mr. B wielded an enormous amount of power in the creation of his ballets, their creation was also dependent on other artists. The same is true for film and television production. While a film has a director, for example Martin Scorsese, the film also has a

writer, a producer, a cast (often led by a star), camera people, sound engineers and grips (to name but a few). In the same vein, television authorship is often associated with its creator or producer. For a series like *All in the Family* (1971 – 1979), although Burt Styler co-wrote the season one episode “Judging Books By Covers,” which dealt with Archie discovering he has a gay friend, Norman Lear is understood as the creator of the series and is considered the singular visionary behind it. As Robert Kubey points out, this kind of creative attribution is not uncommon. He argues “most people know television series by their stars and sometimes by their producers ... We hardly ever talk about television in terms of the director, and when we know the writer in television, he or she is almost always the producer. In television, the producer is the key creative force.”¹ Certainly Lear’s achievement cannot be denied. He was the mind behind many of the most successful and longest-running sitcoms of the 1970s and 1980s – many of which still have a strong presence in syndication– including *Maude* (1972 – 1978), *Sanford and Son* (1972 – 1977), *Good Times* (1974 – 1979) and *The Jeffersons* (1975 – 1985). But what about Styler and all the other writers who worked to continually make *All in the Family* a top-rated program that was often recognized by The Hollywood Foreign Press and the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for its excellence? Certainly, one man (or woman) cannot do that alone, particularly for a series that ran as long as some of Lear’s creations. This chapter, then, is concerned with the episode writers for black-cast sitcoms that feature black gay characters and works from within a *production of culture* approach, which posits that many specialized laborers create the whole that is a television

¹ Robert Kubey, *Creating Television: Conversations with the People Behind 50 Years of American TV* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 18.

show. Analyzing primary in-depth qualitative interviews with the writers of four individual episodes of black-cast sitcoms that have featured black gay characters, I investigate and unpack what prompted writers to write such episodes, their process for writing these individual episodes, and why these black gay characters were one-off characters who never returned to the narrative universe of the series in question. Specifically, this chapter is guided by an attempt to understand how images of black gay men are produced as well as the ways that industrial logics structure and constrains which images can be produced and disseminated.

Broadly, this chapter employs the production of culture approach to authorship and seeks to dismantle the ideology that there are those (usually the showrunner) who hold all of the power within cultural production. As Janet Wolff posits, this approach works against the ideology of “the creation of genius, transcending existence, society and time” and attempts to demonstrate the ways in which “practical activity and creativity are in a mutual relation of interdependence with social structures.”² Further, in another context, Howard Becker argues that the individual artist is never working alone; rather he or she “works in the center of a network of cooperating people, all of whose work is essential to the final outcome.”³ Although paintings are the artistic works to which Becker refers, his notions about the integral collectivity of creative workers is equally applicable to all of the culture industries – including film and television.

² Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 9.

³ Howard Becker, *Art Worlds: 25th Anniversary Edition Updated and Expanded* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 25.

Ultimately, approaches to studying film and television authorship have largely migrated away from simply discussing singular, power-wielding figures and instead have recognized the extraordinary number of laborers who make up a creative whole. As John Caldwell forwards, “negotiated and collective authorship is an almost unavoidable and determining reality in contemporary film/television.”⁴ Building upon “the sociology-of-production approach to authorship... [wherein] authors are considered as taking up roles or functions as workers,” much work on television and film authorship moved toward an understanding of the importance of collective authorship.⁵ This approach suggests that individual workers are part of a greater capitalist system.

As such, the laborers who work in the film and television industries specialize in very particular tasks/roles (writer, producer, director, lighting designer, camera person, etc.) and are “socialized to the norms and values of the industry.”⁶ A writer generally knows what is permissible within the 22-minute situation comedy. And if he or she wants a writing credit for an episode, he or she will need to color inside the lines of the series’ pre-determined norms and values – an issue that is integral to this chapter. This socialization suggests that these creative roles, while specialized, are ultimately part of a system that operates by a set of rules which require adherence if one wishes to continue to work and contribute to the culture industries. It is this threat of “never working in this town again” that, in many cases, drives workers to learn and adhere to the industry’s

⁴ John T. Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 199.

⁵ Janet Staiger, “Authorship Approaches” in David A. Gerstner and Janet Staiger (eds.) *Authorship and Film* (Routledge: New York University Press, 2003), 41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

systems and norms and avoid deviance. As Michel Foucault argues, “discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise.”⁷

However, studying television authorship retains its import. While approaches to television authorship have been viewed as the work of singular artists who wielded power in the decision-making process and placed their “signature” on their work, I am departing from this sort of work in two key ways. First, I am asserting that while the producer (or show runner) has an incredible amount of power with respect to the production of his or her series, there is a reason that individual writers are given authorial credit on episodes. In this way, I argue throughout this chapter that regardless of how much input there was on a script, or the revisions that were made to it, the original writer’s (or writers’) DNA is inextricably part of the fabric of the script. Second, and related to my first departure from the literature, I work against the literature that posits collective authorship defines the way television is made (and therefore, authorship is understood). While there is undoubtedly a writer’s room for each of the series I discuss in this chapter, I am again asserting the agency of the credited writer(s) in the development of the episodes. In the next two sections, I will trace the major movements in scholarship on television authorship.

⁷ Michel Foucault, “The Means of Correct Training,” in *Blackwell Reader on Contemporary Social Theory*, ed. Anthony Elliot (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 97.

Authorship

For many reasons, the concept of the/an author is important in this chapter. First, knowing the author of a text allows for the dissemination of particular knowledges about the text itself. For Foucault, the author is an important part of the creation of discourse, and in so naming an “author,” he or she “performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function.”⁸ Foucault goes on to argue that naming an author “permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others.”⁹ In this way, authorship is similar to genre in that defining “the author” helps us to put things – books, movies, and television shows – into categories. However, it is imperative to remember that this turn toward authorship is historically and culturally situated. John Hartley, following Roland Barthes, argues “authorship emerged not as an attribute of persons, but as a device for the efficient operation of a market.”¹⁰ In other words, the author is a “device for *limiting* rather than *expanding* meaning, reducing what any text or discourse means to the intentions of its designated originator.”¹¹ Janet Staiger further contends that our requirement of “human agents or individual authors to explain the existence of discourses is a historical ideology associated with the appearance of humanism and capitalism.”¹² Capitalism’s relationship with the author is about the twin pillars of profit and discipline. If one can legitimately

⁸ Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 107.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁰ John Hartley, “Authorship and the Narrative of the Self,” in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, ed. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson, (New York: Wiley, 2013), 90.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹² Staiger, “Authorship Approaches,” 28.

claim authorship of a text, then one can also presumably reap the riches associated with authoring such a text. Foucault states, “Once a system of ownership for texts came into being, once strict rules concerning author’s rights, author-publisher relations, rights of production, and related matters were enacted... the possibility of transgression attached to the act of writing took on, more and more, the form of an imperative peculiar to literature.”¹³ For example, a Stephen King book is usually more valuable in the marketplace than is a book by an unknown author. This notion of reaping riches as the author of a text is also rooted in training people to understand the kind of books the market will value as “good” books. Training can also go the other way. As Foucault points out, texts began to have authors once “authors became subject to punishment, that is, to the extent the discourses could be transgressive.”¹⁴ In other words, if a text did not conform to currently held notions of taste and decorum, the author could be punished in myriad ways. For instance, author/composer Igor Stravinsky was sanctioned (at least initially) when riots erupted at the premiere of “Rite of Spring” in 1913. The media reported that the work “flopped” with audiences because it was so far out of sync with the contemporary bourgeois tastes in classical music. However, this so-called scandal surrounding “Rite of Spring” also made Stravinsky even more famous as an important composer. This approach to authorship, finding who can be praised or blamed, permeated early discussion of film and television authors.

Television authorship imported the singular creative figure from early approaches to film authorship; however it was not the director on whom creative and ideological

¹³ Foucault, “What is an Author?,” 108.

¹⁴ Ibid., 108.

agency was bestowed. As Caldwell notes, while television took its cue from film in some ways, it “challenged auteurism in other ways. Even though directors have always been employed in prime-time production, producers have had much more influence over the look and life of a series.”¹⁵ As Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley suggest, television became known as a “producer’s medium.”¹⁶ However, the takeaway from the move to the producer as author in television is not just about who gets creative credit. According to Jane M. Shattuc, “in what may be one of the most rationalized of visual forms, critics isolated TV ‘heroes’ fighting for the originality of their vision over the network’s constant drive for profit. Meaning was no longer the result of only a program (or product), a network, or a star; there was now a maker.”¹⁷ However, as Robert C. Allen observes, “because of the technological complexity of the medium and as a result of the application, to television production, of the principles of modern industrial organization... it is very difficult to locate the ‘author’ of a television program—if we mean by that term the single individual who provides the unifying vision behind the program.”¹⁸

Gregory Adamo begins his chapter, “The Central Role of African American Writers,” with the proclamation that “television is a producer’s medium. That seems to be a given... the executive producer... has the final word, in coordination with the

¹⁵ Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 199.

¹⁶ Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley, *The Producer’s Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 16.

¹⁷ Jane M. Shattuc, “Who Makes American TV?” in *A Companion to Television*, ed. Janet Wasko, (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 144

¹⁸ Robert C. Allen, Introduction to *Channels of Discourse: Television and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Robert C. Allen, (London: Methuen Young Books, 1987), 9.

production studio and the network, on each episode.”¹⁹ Adamo, even as he forwards that black writers play a central role in black-cast television production, continues to accept the logic that in television, the producer is king. This logic also permeates Robin R. Means Coleman and Andre M. Cavalcante’s essay on NBC’s hit series *A Different World*. Coleman and Cavalcante suggest that under different producers, the tone of a show can greatly vary. They argue *A Different World*’s (1987 – 1993) second season operates “from within Blackness, [which makes Debbie] Allen’s show... worlds apart from [Anne] Beatts’s version of the show.”²⁰ The suggestion Coleman and Cavalcante make is that Allen’s blackness affects the authorial tone of *A Different World*’s second through sixth seasons. For them, the role of the writers/writers’ room is diminished in lieu of placing authorial vision with Allen, the show’s executive producer. Even within a chapter titled “The Central Role of African American Writers,” Adamo continues to minimize the role of the writers, forwarding that “a staff writer is at the lowest level of seniority in the writing hierarchy and usually has little impact on the overall direction of a show.”²¹

However, even within the notion of the “producer as king” logic, scholars like Richard Campbell and Jimmie L. Reeves acknowledge that television production does not happen in a vacuum. Rather Campbell and Reeves suggest:

¹⁹ Gregory Adamo, *African Americans in Television: Behind the Scenes* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 99.

²⁰ Robin R. Means Coleman and Andre M. Cavalcante, “Two Different Worlds: Television as a Producer’s Medium,” in *Watching While Black: Centering the Television of Black Audiences*, ed. Beretta E. Smith-Shomade, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 37.

²¹ Adamo, *African Americans in Television*, 110.

It's a mistake to think of television authorship solely in terms of the expression of an individual's artistic vision... [On *Frank's Place* (1987-1988), Hugh] Wilson worked in dialogue with the network, who provided the basic premise, with Tim Reid, who shared executive production duties and was active in the early stages of series development, and with other creative personnel who would play decisive roles in shaping the look and feel of the program.²²

Picking up on this notion of the importance of all workers in a sociology of production, Felicia Henderson documents that it is the writers' room that serves as the nexus of creative output, particularly in sitcoms. Henderson writes:

The writers' room is half-hour comedy's creative ground zero. It is here that a process of collective decision making that I call "situational authorship" exists. Inside this ground zero, quasi-familial and organizational rules structure conventionalized socioprofessional activities that overdetermine the manner by which television's on-screen texts are authored. In this space, ideas are negotiated, consensus is formed, and issues of gender, race, and class identities play out and complicate the on-screen narratives that eventually air on network and cable television.²³

Henderson, a television writer-producer turned media scholar, challenges the agency typically bestowed on producers (at least in the half-hour comedy). While John Caldwell

²² Richard Campbell and Jimmie L. Reeves, "Television Authors: The Case of Hugh Wilson" in *Making Television: Authorship and the Production Process*, ed. Robert J. Thompson and Gary Burns, (New York: Praeger, 1990), 8-9.

²³ Felicia Henderson, "The Culture Behind Closed Doors: Issues of Gender and Race in the Writers' Room," *Cinema Journal*, 50 no. 3, (2011): 146.

acknowledges that the showrunner wields an incredible amount of power and control, he also argues that “the sheer magnitude of the narrative universe needed to support a full season of half-hour or hour-long shows in TV (versus film) means that actual authorship must fall to a sometimes very large team of writers over a year of production.”²⁴

According to the Writers Guild of America West (WGA), the union to which all writers working in Hollywood belong, “The professional showrunner knows how to multitask, making constant decisions that allow everyone to do their best work and production to proceed as efficiently as possible... Because the single most important task of running a TV show is delivering scripts, the focus here is on responsibilities related to managing writers.”²⁵ While showrunners are undoubtedly important to the ways a show is run, the writers remain important resources for developing and writing particular episodes. The WGA contends that writers, particularly those who are not staff writers, “obtain synopses, story outlines, character bios, the show’s ‘bible,’ sample scripts, [and] tapes of recent or important or typical episodes” in order to understand the narrative universe the series occupies.²⁶ This underscores the ways that a set of pre-established rules influences television production. However, the words a writer writes remain of paramount importance. For that reason, this chapter focuses on writers of particular episodes rather than the showrunners who, while often exercising the final say, may or may not have been integral to the inner workings of a particular script.

²⁴ Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 211.

²⁵ Writers Guild of America (WGA hereafter), *Writing for Episodic TV: From Freelance to Showrunner*, 41, Retrieved from http://www.wga.org/uploadedFiles/writers_resources/ep4.pdf

²⁶ Ibid.

Race, Gender and Sexuality in Authorship

Authorship as it relates to race, gender and sexuality is central to this chapter. The writers who participated in this study are two black heterosexual women, one black gay man and one white heterosexual man. Discursively, many who explore approaches to authorship unintentionally navigate around issues of identity ultimately reinforcing normatively raced, gendered and sexual identities. These writers were chosen based on two criteria. First, their scripts/series emerge at an important time with respect to black televisual representation (and the emergence of the post-network era). Second, as I will discuss throughout this chapter, each author had a reason for creating the episode she or he wrote – mostly to try to make black gayness mean something different than it had previously for black-cast sitcom audiences. As I will discuss throughout the rest of this chapter, these writers wanted to attempt to disrupt the ways that televisual blackness excludes gayness in “everyday” life as well as religious life.

In addition to the importance of one’s intersectional identity, Kristal Brent Zook contends that “autobiography, meaning a tendency toward collective and individual authorship of black experience[s],” is [also] an important component of black television.²⁷ In Adamo’s in-depth interviews with black writers and producers, his respondents suggest the importance of their roles in television boils down to that fact that “if they were not involved... shows would be even less realist and more stereotypical.”²⁸ Herman Gray details the intricacies of producing blackness without black series

²⁷ Kristal Brent Zook, *Color by Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.

²⁸ Adamo, *African Americans in Television*, 127.

leadership in his seminal text *Watching Race*. In his interview with African American writers from the series 227 (1985 – 1990), they explained that “the nuances and sensibilities of African American culture that many of them found funny and attempted to bring to particular scripts or scenes became points of professional contention or were eliminated because white head writers and producers thought otherwise.”²⁹ For *The Cosby Show*-spin off *A Different World*, African American authorship was of paramount importance to the ways the show ultimately developed. Between the first and second seasons of the series, the show went through an overhaul, largely because of its less-than-stellar ratings. Gray argues that new executive producer Debbie Allen, who had first-hand experience with black college life as an alum of Howard University, made an explicit authorial turn “toward blackness [and] quickly established a clear identity –... one firmly rooted in African American social experiences and cultural sensibilities.”³⁰ What Gray implicitly suggests is picked up by Coleman and Cavalcante, who assert “that a Black image-maker is a significant factor in producing quality Black imagery.”³¹ While I take issue with Means Coleman’s and Cavalcante’s use of “quality,” the spirit of their assertion remains true – black production staff is an important element in creating black images that hew closer to multi-layered images of black life. In the case of the FOX network’s series *Living Single* (1993 – 1998), Zook posits “while neither Warner Brothers [sic] nor Fox intentionally set out to create a feminist-minded narrative, the mere act of hiring an African American woman [as showrunner] effectively created a

²⁹ Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 71.

³⁰ Ibid., 97.

³¹ Coleman and Cavalcante, “Two Different Worlds,” 41.

space within which collective black female autobiography could potentially thrive.”³² Zook argues that *Living Single* would have been a different series without its black female authorship.

Adamo details the ways in which black authorship impacted production on the series *Sister, Sister* (1994 – 1999). He explains the way Henderson used “her position as supervising producer to prod the writer of [a black history episode]... to create a show that addressed issues not usually explored in a sitcom aimed at teenagers.”³³ Adamo concludes that this successful insertion of black history into a sitcom demonstrates “the impact of involving a number of African Americans in production.”³⁴ While there is no way to discern precisely how race and gender impact television production, the literature reveals that writers’ and producers’ personal histories serve as a guide for the ways in which they develop stories.

Sexuality is equally important. Because gay men and lesbians are socialized in a heterosexual/heterosexist culture, they understand the boundaries of heterosexism – perhaps more than those who are heterosexual. William J. Mann documents that a “certain something” tips the hat of gay men and lesbians working within the culture industries. In his interview with gay screenwriter Gavin Lambert, Mann uncovers Lambert’s belief that gayness in media had to remain subliminal because of the heterosexist, and sometimes anti-gay culture, within which he creates scripts. “It couldn’t

³² Zook, *Color by Fox*, 67.

³³ Adamo, *African Americans in Television*, 117.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

be direct because the mass audience would say, ‘Hey, no way.’ Yet I think if you look at the work of the gay directors, you do see it.”³⁵

Staiger supplements Mann’s findings by suggesting that while members of a minority group undoubtedly produce work within the codes, guidelines and mores of hegemonic normativity, they may use tactics to carefully push authorial limits. She theorizes that some authors may choose to express their minority status via one of six tactical incursions (she concedes there may be more) including the *creation of an alter ego*; *silence*; *repetition: from mimicry to parody to camp*; *recombination*; *inversion*; and/or *accentuation*.³⁶

Staiger’s interventions are most useful in discussing the ways the minority authors in this study reveal that they approached work on their script, in particular *Moesha*’s black gay writer and *All of Us* and *Are We There Yet?* writing team, Jacqueline McKinley and Antonia March. Of Staiger’s six tactics, I will briefly discuss two here because they demonstrate tactics I believe these authors used. The first is the *creation of an alter ego*. In this form of minority authorship, which I suggest Demetrius Bady used on his *Moesha* script, Staiger posits that “an author takes up a subsidiary character in a text to speak for” her/himself.³⁷ Here, Staiger implicitly suggests that in this tactical move, the author’s autobiography is particularly important. Characters within a text are used to help an author express his/her own issues or assist in amplifying her/his marginalized voice. The

³⁵ William J. Mann, *Behind the Screen: How Gay and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood – 1910 – 1969*, (New York: Viking, 2001), 170.

³⁶ Janet Staiger, “Authorship Studies and Gus Van Sant” *Film Criticism* 24, no. 1 (2004): 4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

second tactic is *accentuation*. I argue that Bady, McKinley and March employed this authorial tactic. Staiger, following Valentin N. Volozinov, argues *accentuation* occurs when a group highlights a sign in an attempt to either control or respond to its current meaning.³⁸ The authors are aware of the current signs that are culturally attached to black gayness and attempt to re-define them within their scripts. In this way, Staiger's theorization of *accentuation* is a close neighbor to Stuart Hall's discussion of transcoding, which he describes as "taking an existing meaning and re-appropriating it for new meanings."³⁹ Most often, the authors in this study are seeking to disrupt the semiological marriage between black gayness and femininity and seek to hollow out the ways American viewers had become used to a televisual black gayness that more closely resembled Antoine Meriwether and Blaine Edwards from Fox's sketch comedy series *In Living Color* (1990 – 1994).

Keenan Ivory Wayans, creator of *In Living Color*, gestures toward the importance of gay authorship. In reacting to criticism about the stereotypical representations of Antoine and Blaine in the "Men On..." sketches, Wayans posits, "If gay people want a show that represents them sit down and write a show... You go do your show like I did my show. That I have not seen happen yet."⁴⁰ While Wayans does not acknowledge the difficulties of getting a show to the airwaves, although he is undoubtedly aware of them, he underscores the importance of authorial voice and image-making. Wayans ignores

³⁸ Ibid., 6.

³⁹ Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," in *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 2011), 270.

⁴⁰ Nelson George, *In Living Color: The Authorized Companion to the Fox TV Series*, (New York: Warner Books, 1991), 28.

another important aspect of authorship: authorship, as the literature suggests, does not happen in a vacuum or as a unilateral decision, particularly for minority authors working in television. However, as the interviews included in this chapter demonstrate, when writing stories featuring black gay characters, these authors work to assert their authorial voice even when they may not control what happens to the stories they would like to tell.

This chapter engages with four interviews with writers who have written episodes of black-cast sitcoms that feature black gay characters. Demetrius Bady, Ed Weinberger, Jackie McKinley and Antonia March, the writers whose interviews and episodes provide the case studies for this essay, entered the television industry in the 1990s as smaller/start-up networks, including UPN and Nickelodeon, were beefing up their “urban” programming in a bid to attract black viewers, who were often neglected by ABC, CBS, NBC and increasingly the Fox network. A then-closeted black gay man, Bady entered the television industry in 1994, two years before *Moesha* began its run on UPN, as an assistant on the short-lived Nickelodeon sitcom *My Brother and Me* (Nickelodeon, 1994-1995). In addition to *Moesha*, Bady worked as a freelance writer on *Sister, Sister* (ABC, 1994-1995; The WB, 1995-1999) and *All of Us* (UPN, 2003-2007), and was a staff writer for the first season of the VH1 series *Single Ladies* (VH1, 2011 – 2014; Centric, 2015 -).⁴¹ Both writing positions Bady has held, as a freelance and staff writer, are entry-level positions within the industry and allow showrunners to hire such writers at minimum risk and cost.

⁴¹ Internet Movie Database (IMBD hereafter)., Demetrius Bady, accessed December 14, 2014, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0046263/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1

Weinberger, the only heterosexual white male writer in this study, began working in Hollywood as a writer in the mid-1960s on a number of television specials before creating and writing *The Bill Cosby Show* (NBC, 1969-1971) in 1969. His high-profile jobs in Hollywood as a writer include *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* (NBC, 1962-1992), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977), and *Taxi* (ABC, 1978-1982; NBC, 1982-1983).⁴² Weinberger began working almost exclusively in black-cast sitcoms in the mid-1980s and through the 1990s with work on *Amen* (NBC, 1986-1991), *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-1992), *Sparks* (UPN, 1996-1998) and *Good News* (UPN, 1997-1998, all series he had a hand in creating. His most recent series was *Belle's* for TVOne, which was cancelled in 2013 after one season.

March and McKinley, two heterosexual black women, began working as a writing team in 1998 on *Smart Guy* (The WB, 1997-1999). Their next jobs saw them promoted to staff writers and story editors, then executive story editors, on *The Bernie Mac Show* (FOX, 2001-2006).⁴³ McKinley and March then moved to co-producers and staff writers on *All of Us* and *Are We There Yet?* (TBS, 2010-2012), the series on which they wrote episodes featuring black gay storylines.⁴⁴ The team currently works as consulting producers and writers on the first-run syndicated sitcom *First Family* (2012 -).

⁴² IMDB, Ed Weinberger <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0918165/>, accessed December 14, 2014.

⁴³ The WGA *Writing for Episodic TV* booklet defines a staff writer as a staff member whose is charged with delivering his or her own scripts, but also collaborating with other staff writers. WGA defines a story editor as a writer who has additional tasks in addition to writing. The story editor receives a screen credit on a separate title card. A story editor is paid on a per-episode basis and is entitled to a minimum salary, unlike staff and freelance writers. <http://www.wga.org/content/default.aspx?id=156>

⁴⁴ Antonia March, Interview by Author. Tape Recording. March 18, 2013, Austin, TX.

This chapter examines four case studies. The earliest case study, *Moesha*, premiered on UPN as a mid-season replacement, after CBS rejected the pilot. The series, which became one of the few early successes for the struggling new network, starred pop singer Brandy Norwood as the axial character of this family sitcom based in Los Angeles. As Susanne Daniels and Cynthia Littleton detail, *Moesha*'s success led UPN to shift "its programming strategy entirely and [load] up two nights of its three-night schedule with six sitcoms featuring predominantly African American casts."⁴⁵ The series dealt with "issues" including teen pregnancy, race relations and premarital sex. One such issue with which the series dealt was homosexuality in the second season episode "Labels" written by Bady. The episode, which originally aired October 1, 1996, concerns Moesha going on a date with series co-star Hakeem's cousin Omar. After meeting Omar's flamboyant friend Tracy, Moesha suspects that Omar might be gay.

The second series, UPN's *Good News*, follows a Los Angeles church as they install a new pastor and attempt to reunite the congregation. The short-lived series, which was the last series produced by MTM Enterprises, aired on Monday nights along with most of UPN's other black-cast sitcoms (excepting *Moesha*) including *In the House* (NBC, 1995-1996; UPN, 1996-1999), *Malcolm & Eddie* (UPN, 1996-2000), and *Sparks* (1996-1998). Like *Moesha*, *Good News* is centrally concerned with dealing with social issues. Homosexuality is the issue with which the series grapples in its "Pilot" episode, which aired on August 25, 1997. The "Pilot," is principally concerned with installation of a new pastor as its primary story. The secondary story concerns a member requesting the

⁴⁵ Susanne Daniels and Cynthia Littleton. *Season Finale: The Unexpected Rise and Fall of the WB and UPN* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 107.

new pastor's help in coming-out to his mother, who also happens to be a member of the church choir.

The third series, *All of Us* began life on UPN in 2003 and was one of the few black-cast sitcoms, along with *Girlfriends* (UPN, 2000-2006; The CW 2006-2008) and *Everybody Hates Chris* (UPN, 2005-2006, The CW, 2006-2009), that moved to the new CW network when UPN and the WB merged in 2006. *All of Us* dealt with the trials and tribulations of the blended James family. As Daniels and Littleton argue, the series “was a cut above the garden-variety UPN sitcom.”⁴⁶ Part of its cut-above-ness came from its executive producers, Hollywood couple Will and Jada Smith, who “maintained a semi-regular presence on the set, reviewed scripts, and contributed to the writing process – particularly during the first season.”⁴⁷ The series dealt with the trials and tribulations of the blended James family. Unlike *Moesha*, *All of Us* was unlikely to deal with “issues” although the series’ fourth season features a three-part arc that centers on Robert (series star Duane Martin) discovering that the man who raised him is not his biological father, and that his biological father is gay. The episode that most-explicitly deals with homosexuality via the appearance of a gay character is the November 20, 2006 episode “My Two Dads,” written by McKinley and March, who were co-producers on the series.

Lastly, the TBS series *Are We There Yet?* premiered in 2010 as TBS was re-igniting its foray into original programming. *Are We There Yet?*, based on the 2005 film of the same name, centered on the Kingston-Persons household and their issues coping as a blended family with two teenagers. *Are We There Yet?* was greenlit with a 10/90 deal,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 305.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 305

which includes production of 10 episodes and, provided the episodes reach a pre-determined audience rating, 90 additional episodes are ordered to ensure that the series will reach the 100 episodes needed for syndication. The first such deal the network struck was with Tyler Perry Studios for production on *House of Payne* (first-run syndication 2006-2007, TBS, 2007-2012) and *Meet the Browns* (TBS, 2006-2012). The second-season episode that I analyze in this chapter, “The Boy Has Style,” originally aired January 19, 2011, and concerns matriarch Suzanne suspecting that her daughter Lindsey’s crush might be gay because he has a “sense of style.” Suzanne shares the information with her husband who helps Cedric come-out to Lindsey. March and McKinley wrote the episode, which was nominated for a GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Individual Episode in a series without a regular LGBT character.

Forms of Authorship in Black-Cast Sitcoms

The writers interviewed in this chapter represent the myriad ways authorship works in practice on black-cast sitcoms. However, the one constant is that each series used a writer’s room where the writers, at all levels, came together to work on story pitches, ideas, and generally to shape the way a script (or scripts) developed. For *Moesha*, Bady says that it was typical to have up to 10 writers in the writer’s room who contributed in various ways to the stories chosen for development into scripts for the series. However, he contends that in contemporary television production, a large writing staff on black-cast sitcoms is considered to be six writers. Most story ideas begin in the writer’s room, and as the writers interviewed for this study reveal, have some semblance

of relation to their own lives. McKinley revealed that most stories begin with the showrunner or a writer suggesting a situation to the room. Very often, that idea will result in various writers chiming in and adding detail to the initial situation until there is a broad outline for how the three act sitcom will be structured. The writer who proposed the initial idea is often selected to write the first draft of the script, which remains subject to input, feedback and tweaking by the showrunner and writers in the writer's room, often up until the episode has been filmed. When disagreements arise with respect to the direction of a script, the showrunner exercises the power to make the final decision.

In *Trapped in a Generic Closet*, the writers I interviewed occupied a number of different levels within the writer's room hierarchy. Some of the writers were staff writers, positions generally understood as having little power in the writers' room, while others were producers and others still were creators. The position these episode writers held often determined the ways the episode developed and their level of agency in relation to authorship. For instance, Bady, the credited writer on the *Moesha* episode "Labels," says that he was granted a lot of leeway in writing the episode and determining its narrative direction. At the time, Bady was a freelance writer on the show, which meant that the executive producers were under no obligation to use and/or workshop the episode he wrote. However, as most of the writers in this study reveal, writers are not able to go off and write whatever they like. While the idea for the story was Bady's own, he concedes:

The story was pretty much beat out before I left to write it... I don't think [the other writers] wanted to mess with Omar's [the black gay character's] journey. I think everybody knew that, in terms of black television, there'd

never been a black gay teenager on a black show... And so, they were very aware of that. We were very aware of trying to get that right... [For “Labels”] no one else in the writing room had as much authority as I did with the subject matter.⁴⁸

Bady implicitly posits that his own gayness, even if he was not openly gay in the workplace at the time, lends some credibility and authenticity to the ways he crafted his script and Omar’s narrative arc within it. As Zook stresses, autobiography remains a key component in developing scripts for black television. She posits that this sense of autobiography leads to particularized story lines that have racially specific/“in-group” significance.⁴⁹ Here, I suggest that for Bady, the autobiographical component of his script also has specific significance as it relates to the intersection of his gayness and his blackness. In particular, Bady, like his character Omar, was not comfortable enough in his skin to proclaim his sexuality – even as he contends that he does not believe the public declaration of one’s sexuality is important.

While the script certainly went through workshoping that is indicative of the way television is made, Bady contends that the narrative structure remained relatively untouched. The writers’ room had decided that the story would principally concern Moesha, still reeling from a breakup with Q, meets Hakeem’s cousin Omar and the two go out on a date together. During the date, Moesha begins to believe that Omar might be gay because of how the way he reacts to her romantic advances. Moesha ill-advisedly tells her gossipy best friends Kim and Niecy, who spread the gossip around school that

⁴⁸ Demetrius Bady, Interview by Author, February 27, 2013.

⁴⁹ Zook, *Color by Fox*, 5.

Omar *is* gay, versus that he *might* be gay. However, after seeing Bady's first draft of the script, showrunner Ralph Farquhar and story editor Ron Neal made one significant change that Bady protested: they added a flamboyantly gay character named Tracey. As Bady recalls, when Farquhar and Neal received the script, they said they liked the script. However, overnight they added a scene wherein Tracey's flamboyance works to raise the suspicion that Omar might be gay. He recalls:

I protested because I thought they were making fun [of gay people]. They wanted the flaming queen. I protested and protested and Ralph finally said "You're not going to win this one." I should have been fired for how hard I fought to keep Tracey out of that script. To their credit they did not fire me and Ralph was like "I'm calling it, I'm the executive producer, so it's staying in."⁵⁰

Part of Bady's protest is rooted in what Jasmine Nichole Cobb and Robin R. Means-Coleman, building on Patricia Hill Collins's work, call "controlling images" of black sexuality. In their examination of network and cable representations of black gayness, Cobb and Means-Coleman assert that television "is now willing to conceptualize a black sexuality that does not threaten white women, [but] depictions of black queer identities frequently involve interpersonal problems, violence, and (someone's) destruction."⁵¹ Ultimately they argue that particularly within the comedy genre (which is where most

⁵⁰ Bady Interview.

⁵¹ Jasmine Cobb and Robin Means-Coleman. "Two Snaps and a Twist: Controlling Images of Black Male Homosexuality on Television." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, San Francisco, CA, May 23, 2007, 2.

black gay televisual representations are situated) these images are “properly contained and controlled.”⁵²

Aside from the addition of the character Tracey, the other *Moesha* writers and producers left the main narrative of the script alone. However, Bady believes that the script was largely untouched because many people on the staff were unsupportive of the episode’s subject matter and were criticizing it behind his back. But while the comments may have been hurtful, Bady knew that in order to keep his job, he had to resist the urge to confront those who had made disparaging remarks about his script. “Somebody pulled me aside and told me [about] the nasty things that were being said by [series star] Brandy and her family [about the episode].”⁵³ He recalls that Brandy was heard saying, “I’m not surprised that [Bady] wrote this shit,” suggesting that she found the inclusion of gay content unacceptable.⁵⁴ But these comments were behind his back and came back to him via the rumor mill. “Publically everyone came out and gave me hugs... I remember being disappointed that I had to hug them in front of the audience. Rather than making this big deal of pulling me out on the stage and saying this is the person that wrote it, behind the scenes they were talking really nasty.”⁵⁵ However, not all of the aftermath of the episode was negative. Bady recalls when he received a letter from a viewer:

It was a letter from a 16-year-old boy from Seattle, Washington, who thanked me in what was obviously a hand-written letter, tear stains on the page, thanking me for that episode and saying that he had always felt

⁵² Ibid., 4.

⁵³ Bady, Interview.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

alone and that episode helped to change his life. I kept that letter for years.

It is the only time in the history of the show as far as I know we never got a letter that powerful, quite that moving.⁵⁶

Although Bady was not a staff writer, his experience writing “Labels” mirrors the experience of *All of Us* staff writers and co-producers McKinley and March, who are the credited writers for the episode “My Two Dads.” The story for “My Two Dads” evolved and changed in the writers’ room. McKinley recalled, “Scenarios involving that whole family, how they react, those types of things change[d]... Everything changed in that episode, like most sitcoms.”⁵⁷ However, McKinley was quick to add, “As far as the character being gay and who he was, that was always there. We very quickly went to: What if the [biological] father is gay?”⁵⁸ While it was a group writing effort, McKinley and March suggested that some of the writers in the room wanted the gay characters to be more feminine. As writers and series co-producers, they fought against that characterization. McKinley recalled:

The one thing we wanted to avoid was having a stereotypical gay man.

You know, it’s not that the character was hiding because [he] was openly gay, but we didn’t want it to be a caricature of a gay man... We even discussed his boyfriend: what’s his boyfriend going to be like? Is he going

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Jacqueline McKinley, Interview by Author. Tape Recording. March 22, 2013, Austin, TX.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

to be more flamboyant? We didn't go [in] that direction. We just had two guys that have been dating for years.⁵⁹

March adds, "We just wanted to get rid of this stigma with gay black men [in the "My Two Dads" episode]... I'm a big supporter of black gay men... I explain how they have a hard time, and that we want[ed] to give them a platform and tell them that it's okay if they love another black man. That was the platform we wanted to show."⁶⁰

With both episodes McKinley and March wrote, they were very aware of past stereotypes of gay men in media and attempted to work against them. They were also particularly aware of the ways black gayness had historically been mass mediated. March stated:

We just wanted all three characters (two on *All of Us* and one on *Are We There Yet?*) just to be regular guys. Not every gay man is Antoine Meriwether [from *In Living Color*'s "Men On..." sketches]. They're just regular guys. They just have other [sexual] interests. We just didn't want it to be the typical, for lack of a better term, flamboyant, the stereotypical way to go. We wanted to go another way in both episodes.⁶¹

Part of the "regular-ness" March references in all three gay black characters is their tie to sports as the ultimate arbiter of masculinity. While Stephen Tropiano's discussion of the characteristics of the coming-out episode is responding to white-/multi-cultural-cast sitcoms and white gay characters, his insights are instructive. He theorizes "The

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ March, Interview.

⁶¹ Ibid.

individual who comes out is usually the least likely. The men are overly masculine (i.e. the ex-football player)... and [do not] display any stereotypical traits.”⁶² In both scripts, March and McKinley include an emphasis on hyper-masculinity (as conveyed through sports), which also assists in the ultimate “surprise” that the characters are gay. McKinley said, “We were very aware to try to not act like these guys [in the “My Two Dads” episode] are from Mars. When they are sitting around watching the game, they liked football too, so that was a choice.”⁶³

Unlike Bady’s experience on *Moesha*, there was little fall-out from the “My Two Dads” episode. March recalled that the actors who played the gay characters on the episode were comfortable playing the roles. “Glen Charmin and Richard Larson were very professional and ready to do anything we asked them to do. I do not recall any pushback.”⁶⁴ McKinley concurs, stating “We thought [pushback and problems] would happen because we had certain guys on our cast that we felt were kind of macho guys, and we thought maybe they would be upset with that, but that wasn’t the case, they had no problem with it.”⁶⁵ McKinley expected a negative reaction to the episode’s content because of the historical abjection of black homosexuality from notions of “authentic” black masculinity. Although there is little intimacy between the two gay characters except a hug and the exchange of the term of endearment, “Baby,” McKinley expected the heterosexual male actors on the series would find the presence of homosexuality in

⁶² Stephen Tropiano, *The Prime Time Closet: A History of Gays and Lesbians on TV* (New York: Applause Books, 2002), 192.

⁶³ McKinley, Interview.

⁶⁴ March, Interview.

⁶⁵ McKinley, Interview.

the narrative objectionable because of its incongruence with hegemonic black masculinity. As Ronald L. Jackson and Celnisha L. Dangerfield assert “the public narratives pertaining to Black men's lives comply with several racialized social projections about the Black masculine body as (1) violent, (2) sexual, and (3) incompetent,” which are out of sync with the ways black homosexuality is imagined.⁶⁶

When the two women worked on TBS's *Are We There Yet?* as co-producers and writers, they still went through the typical writers' room process. Because neither Marsh nor McKinley were the series' showrunner, they had to follow orders. This illustrates how the credited author of an episode often has little agency over the way a story develops that carries her/his name. The Writers Guild of America (WGA) booklet *Writing for Episodic TV: From Freelance to Showrunner* details, “As a staff member, your primary responsibility is still to deliver your own scripts, but now you will also be expected to collaborate with the other writers on staff. You answer to the showrunner unless he or she has delegated that authority to another writer-producer.”⁶⁷

Felicia Henderson, reflecting on her experience as a writer-producer, asserts “once a story area is ‘broken,’ or agreed upon and approved by the head writer... one of the writers on the writing staff is assigned the task of outlining and writing the script. However, before that writer is released to write the script, she or he has heard many

⁶⁶ Ronald L. Jackson and Celnisha L. Dangerfield, “Defining Black Masculinity as a Cultural Property: An Identity Negotiation Paradigm” in *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, ed. Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter (Florence, KY: Wadsworth Publishing, 2002), 123.

⁶⁷ WGA, *Writing for Episodic TV*, 20.

individual writers' perspectives on the story.”⁶⁸ Because of this collaborative process, the story a writer pitches can sometimes not be the story that ultimately ends up being written. As March suggested “Things change on the fly on TV. We were lucky that he was still gay by the end of the episode!”⁶⁹

However, sometimes the direction the writers' room dictates a writer must take does not always net the intended results. That was the case with the script for “The Boy Has Style” script for *Are We There Yet?* As McKinley detailed, when “the showrunner got [the script] and looked at it, he said, “We can’t put this out. I’m a supporter of the gays and I can’t have this [episode] coming out.” The direction the staff writers and producers suggested McKinley and March take for “The Boy Has Style” received a different reaction when the script was fully written. While McKinley and March knew the direction the writers' room gave would make the script’s treatment of homosexuality harsh, they wrote it following that direction. Once they gave the room what they wanted, the producers and writers protested the harsh treatment. McKinley said, “When you’re a writer you have to follow the [story] outline the room decides; you might not agree with it. I didn’t, but the script that we turned in was very harsh, a little more harsh.”⁷⁰ McKinley recalled, “At one point the father was going to come to [Cedric] and say, ‘How dare you lead my daughter on!’ We just felt that it was kind of crazy; it was almost bordering on the father almost bashing [Cedric] a little bit.”⁷¹ In subsequent drafts, the conversation was softened so that the father did not appear as hostile toward Cedric’s

⁶⁸ Henderson, “The Culture Behind Closed Doors,” 147.

⁶⁹ March, Interview.

⁷⁰ McKinley Interview.

⁷¹ Ibid.

homosexuality. Ultimately, the episode was revised to have the father suggesting that he was fine if Cedric were gay, but that Cedric needed to tell his daughter so as not to lead her on.

Weinberger, the writer of the pilot episode of *Good News*, had a different relationship to authorship because he was both the writer and creator of the series. He said:

There wasn't anyone but me. I started with the idea that [dealing with a gay parishioner] was an interesting dilemma for a first-time minister in a black church given what I know about the black church's point of view regarding gay members or just the gay community. I thought this was an interesting predicament that could be done satirically, but could also make a point, but could also be funny.⁷²

Even as Weinberger wrote the episode he wanted and did not have to compromise his vision to fit into those of other writers' ideas about the direction of the script, he was faced with other issues related to authorship and production. Weinberger developed the idea for the series and had the green light from the new network UPN to do whatever series he liked. He recalled, "My relations with the network at the time were such that if we were able to do a decent pilot I was assured that the series would be picked up."⁷³ However, he had a problem finding an actor to play the lead character. "Originally the part was written for Kirk Franklin. He was going to be the star of the show. He objected

⁷² Ed Weinberger, Interview by Author. Tape Recording. March 19, 2013, Austin, TX.

⁷³ Ibid.

to the material, and I refused to change it.”⁷⁴ This power to refuse to make script changes is a power the rested with Weinberger because he wore several hats within the series. As creator, showrunner and writer, he wielded a kind of power that none of the other writers in this study had. As McKinley, March and Bady suggested, even if they were unhappy with the direction the writers’ room and/or showrunner wanted to take, their only form of recourse was to go along with the changes or quit. However, Weinberger’s approach to the difficulties with the actor was to re-cast the part rather than make any changes. He said, the subject matter of the episode was:

bold enough... that Kirk Franklin would choose not to do it because of his religious position, which I guess is a couple of quotations: one in *Leviticus* and one in either John or Paul’s Letters to the *Corinthians*. There are two anti-gay statements in there. We debated the theological grounds for that and went ‘round and ‘round. I couldn’t convince him that Leviticus was wrong and that Jesus never spoke against homosexuality... [Jesus] never commented on it. Had he been given that issue, I think he would have sided on compassion and love as opposed to ostracizing somebody because of their sexual orientation. That was an argument that I didn’t win with Mr. Franklin... That’s how David Ramsey became the [series] lead.⁷⁵

Even after Ramsey was cast instead of Franklin, there were still casting issues for the series because of the subject matter of the pilot. Weinberger wanted the series to feel as

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

real as possible, and, as such, he recruited churchgoers from Los Angeles area churches to work as extras. He recalled:

At one point one woman objected to the whole idea of the show. When she did, I just made a little speech to everybody expressing my beliefs and what this church [within the series] believed, that this church, at least as long as I was running [the series], it was going to be a forgiving and compassionate one, closer to what I believe Jesus would have said... She was there with her daughter as a matter of fact, and she said to her daughter, "Ok, we're leaving." I said that anyone who objects to this should get up and go out. "If the show is in conflict with your religious convictions then I think you shouldn't be part of it." That woman was the only one that left out of the 200 on the show. Once we settled on the principal cast, no one else had any problems with the subject matter.⁷⁶

This power to dismiss cast members and extras is rooted in Weinberger's position within the series. Newcomb and Alley suggest that the executive producer (who is also colloquially known as the showrunner) "is the person who must oversee entire projects. The producer is the person who must hire and fire other members of the production team... The producer, involved with the project from beginning to end, sees to it that continuity is maintained, that peace is kept among other members of the team, and most importantly, that the series concept remains secure."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Newcomb and Alley, *The Producer's Medium*, xii.

Ultimately, the writers in this study suggest that while they often worked under the direction of a showrunner (excepting Weinberger), they still exercised some agency in the direction of the script. They certainly had to acknowledge the will of the collective of writers, who worked under the direction of the showrunner, who had the final say. As Bady discovered on his “Labels” script and McKinley and March on their “The Boy Has Style” script, sometimes the showrunner simply “pulls rank” and decides that the script should develop in a certain way, regardless of individual writer’s wishes. In this way, this confirms much of the literature on authorship in television. However, that remains only part of the story. As Henderson expressed in an interview with Caldwell, “writers now function as the creative heads in television... To talk of creative agency or power in television today means to pay particular attention to the writer-producer hybrid. Yet some scholars ignore the writers’ side of the ‘hyphenate’ and continue to conflate power with a non-writing producer function.”⁷⁸ Ultimately then, even as writers have a chain of command that they must follow, they still have a voice within the series and episodes on which they write.

⁷⁸ John T. Caldwell, “‘Both Sides of the Fence’: Blurred Distinctions in Scholarship and Production (A Portfolio of Interviews).” In Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks and John Thornton Caldwell (eds.) *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 225-226.

Authorship and the Coming-Out Episode

For many gay men and women, “coming out” – the act of telling family, loved ones, friends, and/or co-workers about one’s sexuality – is an important rite of passage and part of one’s gay identity development. As discussed previously, several psychology and sociology scholars have created identity development models to explain the ways in which gay men (and sometimes lesbians) make sense of their gayness. The rhetoric behind each of these scholars’ emphasis on disclosure is rooted in gay liberation, which in some ways can be linked to the July 1969 formation of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), which was created as a splinter group by former Mattachine Society members who thought the latter organization too conservative. Every word in the new organization’s name, particularly the words ‘gay’ and ‘liberation’ was deliberate and meaningful. “In calling itself ‘gay,’ GLF signaled its opposition to the medical discourse of ‘homosexuality,’ its critique of ‘homophile’ politics, and its proud and public orientation... In embracing ‘liberation,’ GLF rejected a narrow liberal focus on legal rights and embraced a broader leftist agenda of freedom, justice and equality.”⁷⁹ GLF, then, understood that the act of publicly declaring one’s homosexuality was a political act. To call oneself gay was to be proud and liberated from homophobic oppression within a heteronormative society.

⁷⁹ Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 82.

While there is certainly some truth in the notion of pride and acceptance of one's sexuality, there is also a cultural understanding that in a heteronormative society, one *must* disclose any sexual orientation that deviates from heterosexuality. Eve Sedgwick theorizes that whether one is "in" or "out" of the closet, "there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence."⁸⁰ Suzanna Danuta Walters supplements Sedgwick's assertions by suggesting "many [gay men and lesbians] still feel [the closet's] power and live deeply within its parameters."⁸¹ In other words, the closet creates a binary by which there are those who are out and those who are not (and the accompanying value judgments based upon one's positionality in relation to the closet), thus ultimately continuing to shape the lives of gay men and lesbians. Diana Fuss illuminates the ways in which this binary also creates a double bind when she argues, "to be out is to be in—inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible."⁸²

The organizing logic of the closet and confession of gay and lesbian identity is most often deployed with episodic gay characters (like those that are the subject of *Trapped in a Generic Closet*). As Stephen Tropiano asserts, "the most common gay-themed episode is the 'coming-out' episode, typically concerning a series regular who

⁸⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 68.

⁸¹ Suzanna Danuta Walters, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 9.

⁸² Diana Fuss, "Inside/Out" in Diana Fuss (eds.) *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 4.

learns someone in his or her life... is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.”⁸³ While Tropiano generally discusses comedic series that aired between the 1970s and the late 1990s and does not consider race, his observation dovetails neatly with the ways the black-cast sitcoms in this study approach gayness in the late 1990s, 2000s and 2010s. Tropiano theorizes that in “coming out” episodes, by the end of the half-hour episode, viewers will know who is gay and who is not. Once this confirmation (and confession) occurs, these gay characters, because of their supporting role in the show, ride off into the sunset without allowing viewers to understand what the confession means. Certainly the viewer knows that the character is gay or lesbian (because the speech act of coming-out has been made imperative), but they have no concept of what that means for the world the other heterosexual characters inhabit. As Lynne Joyrich asserts, “the closet becomes an implicit TV form – a logic governing not only the ways in which gays and lesbians are represented but also the generation of narratives and positions on and for TV even in the absence of openly gay characters (or gay characters at all).”⁸⁴

Given this importance (and the possibility for the drama often associated with coming-out stories), it seems is no surprise that coming-out episodes are among the most frequent episodes that have featured gay characters, particularly in the sitcom, which is often predicated on a “problem of the week” that gets solved within a single 22-minute episode. All of the writers referenced in this study, in one form or another, wrote a coming-out episode when allowed to write a story with a black gay character. The

⁸³ Tropiano, *The Prime Time Closet*, 191-192.

⁸⁴ Lynne Joyrich, “Epistemology of the Console,” in *Queer TV: Theories, Historic, Politics*, ed. Glyn Davis and Gary Needham (New York: Routledge, 2009), 27.

episodes of *Good News* and *Are We There Yet?* are most clearly and classically coming-out episodes. While not as obviously coming-out narratives, when examined in depth, both *Moesha* and *All of Us* closely follow this trope as well. While there were certainly other narratives operating within *Moesha* and *All of Us*, as far as black gayness is narratively concerned, coming-out is the primary function of black gay characters. The *Moesha* “Labels” episode could be interpreted as an episode about the consequences of gossip, but it is ultimately about the ways that gossip comes to bear on homosexuality, as a deviant from heterosexuality. The gossip about Omar’s sexuality ultimately forces him to come out to his cousin. Similarly, in the *All of Us* episodes, while there is no hand wringing about the decision to come out or not, Luther’s sole narrative purpose is to publicly confirm his homosexuality for the recurring cast (and at-home audiences). The episode can initially be understood as a revelation that someone in one of the main characters’ life is gay. However, within that revelation exists the need for the confirmation of gayness; once detected and revealed, gayness has exhausted its narrative utility. I return to this topic later in this chapter.

Bady, the sole credited author on the second season episode “Labels,” recalls that he was first asked if he wanted to write an episode and, when he enthusiastically said yes, he was told he could choose the topic. Because Bady was not openly gay in the workplace (although he believes it was an “open secret”), the story for “Labels” was near and dear to him. However, Bady deviates from most coming-out episodes because the phraseology “I’m gay” is never uttered. As Deborah A. Chirrey argues, “the speaker who comes out is, therefore, challenging [a heteronormative] view of the world: demanding

that attention be paid to their gayness, insisting on their existence as a lesbian or a gay man, and refusing to accept negative evaluation of themselves and their lifestyle.”⁸⁵ However, Bady says that he did *not* want that utterance in his script. One of the final scenes shows Omar whispering something to his cousin Hakeem, and Hakeem responding coldly. However what Omar has said remains unknown. “Everything was very specific about that episode,” Bady recalled. “I remember making all of these impassioned arguments about why we should never hear what Hakeem’s cousin says because it really shouldn’t matter.”⁸⁶ As a black gay man, Bady’s steadfastness in maintaining Omar’s sexuality as his own, private matter may be rooted in much of the research conducted on black gay men and their coming-out processes. As Dorie Martinez and Stonie Sullivan suggest in their coming-out model for black gay men, “when there is a strong perception of homophobia emanating from the community to which they feel connected, many African American gay men and lesbians consider themselves to be better off if they do not come out to their families, friends, and community.”⁸⁷ In other words, to avoid negative reactions, many African American gay men place import in the last phase of most models of gay identity development, coming out. This, perhaps, supports Bady’s assertion that the utterance, “I’m gay” is an unnecessary narrative device, a fight he ultimately won. Bady reflected, “The idea that Omar whispers [something] in Hakeem’s ear and the audience never hears him say [he’s gay] is a mirror

⁸⁵ Deborah A. Chirrey, “‘I hereby come out’: What sort of speech act is coming out?” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 7(1), 2003: 24.

⁸⁶ Bady, Interview.

⁸⁷ Dorie Gilbert Martinez and Stonie C. Sullivan. “African American Gay Men and Lesbians: Examining the Complexity of Gay Identity Development.” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 1 no. 2/3 (1998): 252.

reflection of how I was living my life... The idea that I was saying it shouldn't matter meant [Omar did] not acknowledge himself in a very verbal and definitive way.”⁸⁸ Bady appears to be presenting a culturally specific version of a black gay male in relation to social context and identity. Ultimately, then, Bady rejects the notion that Omar should demand the world pay attention to his gayness. Rather, Omar's sexuality becomes his own – not out of some “closetedness” – rather, because he wants his sexuality to be private – as it is for most heterosexuals in Western culture. The script for the episode then denies the characters the opportunity to react to Omar's gayness in fact. Rather, they react to the rumor that he *might* be gay.

On *All of Us*, writing team and co-producers McKinley and March felt differently than Bady about the declaration of homosexuality in their episode “My Two Dads.” The episode deals with series lead Robert's discovery that an adoptive father raised him and that Luther, his birth father, is gay. While McKinley and March are credited with writing the series, they are both quick to point out that the story outline was worked out in the writers' room. Unlike Bady's experience on *Moesha*, there was group discussion about the direction of the episode, which was part of a three-episode arc. McKinley noted, “The outline of the entire story was different. We always wanted his father to be gay, but it started in layers. [Robert] finds out that he's adopted and that's where we started. What if he finds out that his father is gay? How does he deal with a new man in his life and the fact that he might not be what he imagined his Dad to be, whatever that means.”⁸⁹ March concurred, “there was always a time where we wanted Robert to find out [his birth father

⁸⁸ Bady, Interview.

⁸⁹ McKinley, Interview.

was gay] so that there was no mistake... I just knew that we wanted it to be something that would not be mistaken where Robert could say, 'Maybe I saw it or maybe I didn't.' It was very clear.”⁹⁰ March is referring to a kiss between Robert’s birth father Luther and his boyfriend at the end of the second episode (“Like Father, Like Son, Like Hell”) of the three-part story arc. Interestingly, the gay character never utters the phrase, “I’m gay.” His actions, namely kissing his boyfriend on the lips, perform the function of coming-out. McKinley and March are adamant that they wanted no narrative ambiguity. In addition to being seen kissing his boyfriend, Luther is asked by the adoptive father’s wife to confirm Luther’s gayness. Then, he asks Luther if he is sure that he is gay. Rather than confirming his sexuality with dialogue, McKinley and March choose to have him “come out” by saying, “Ask my boyfriend.” McKinley and March still provide the narrative clarity that has become one of the hallmarks of the coming-out episode. McKinley underscores that one of the things important to her and March was that they

didn’t want [Robert] to find out his father is gay and that’s the reason [Robert] rejects him. We wanted to make it clear that [Robert is] upset [because he finds out] that he’s adopted at the last minute. He has to kind of come to terms with the fact that he has a new father *and* he’s gay. It was layered on that story. We wanted him to be accepting at the end... We... want[ed] him to come to terms and think, “This guy’s pretty cool, I want

⁹⁰ March, Interview.

to meet my father.” In the last [episode, Robert is] accepting enough for his father to bring his boyfriend [to Thanksgiving dinner].⁹¹

As Tropiano details, a hallmark of the “Coming Out” episode is that “although hard to accept at first, the character eventually offers his/her support [for the gay character].”⁹² This mandatory acceptance is part of March and McKinley’s insistence that Robert “come to terms” with his father’s gayness and allows him to “bring his boyfriend” to Thanksgiving dinner. In this way, “My Two Dads” ceases to be about gayness per se and instead is more concerned with demonstrating the “coolness” of the core cast with respect to the episodic gay narrative “problem.” Luther’s sexuality, then, is not his own – it is a narrative catalyst that underscores homosexuality’s relationship to the otherwise heterosexual universe of the series.

March and McKinley carried this logic onto *Are We There Yet?*, a show on which they were staff writers. “The Boy Has Style” is somewhat autobiographical for McKinley. She recalled that she once dated a man who was not yet openly gay:

There were some obvious clues, but we would always talk about marriage and children. He would talk to me like we would have a relationship together, and I think that’s what he wanted. In all honestly I don’t think he was duping me, or anything like that... One question I had asked him I said... “Just tell me, are you gay?” He said, “Why must you label things?”

⁹¹ McKinley, Interview.

⁹² Tropiano, *The Prime Time Closet*, 192.

I said, “Okay, you’re gay.” That was fine. I thought, what if a character is dating a gay guy that’s not completely out?⁹³

In this way, the impetus for the episode mirrors what Zook suggests about black productions of the 1990s when she says that they were “individual autobiographies as well as communal outpourings of group desire – collective rememberings...”⁹⁴ McKinley stated that she had used fashion as a technology to read gayness onto the bodies of men she has previously dated. As Kathryn Bond Stockton argues, “cloth and skin touch on each other’s meanings since each is a surface – with intense, complex and variable codings attached to it – that may be the object of prejudice, violence, attraction and invective.”⁹⁵ Thus, as an episode, “The Boy Has Style” marries McKinley’s autobiography with the variable codings of clothing Stockton suggests, to ultimately create a narrative conflict rooted in homosexuality.

The impetus for the episode also has its roots in the societal demand for disclosure. Failure to disclose sexuality that deviates from normative heterosexuality is often considered trickery and dishonesty. Foucault argues “the confession [of sexuality] became one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth.”⁹⁶ This discourse of knowledge production about (homo)sexuality permeates the way the episode developed from the authors’ perspective. March recalls that they “chose the dialogue very carefully... The father even said that ‘I don’t care that you’re gay, what I care about is

⁹³ McKinley, Interview.

⁹⁴ Zook, *Color by Fox*, 3.

⁹⁵ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where “Black” Meets “Queer”* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 40.

⁹⁶ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 59.

that you are hurting my daughter.’ He was cool about it, but he wanted Cedric to tell her that he was gay.” In other words, in writing the script, the disclosure of Cedric’s homosexuality is what becomes important. Despite McKinley’s assertion that they “really wanted this guy where you knew he was gay but the guy doesn’t have a problem with it... He wasn’t in the closet but he wasn’t telling everybody on the street that he’s gay, [he] just thought [everyone] knew,” within the dynamics of the narrative, Cedric is forced to admit that he is gay. This disclosure is not rooted in his desire to come out; rather, the suggestion is that by refusing to publicly claim one’s homosexuality, one is being somehow dishonest or deceiving others. His sexuality cannot be his own; rather it must be publicly disclosed. This investment in sexual disclosure is couched within the notion that, according to McKinley, the father was upset that Cedric “was fooling his daughter into thinking that he liked her. He didn’t want... [his daughter to] think, ‘Oh my God! Is there something wrong with me?’”⁹⁷ Once again, the character’s coming-out ceases to be about his sexuality, rather it is about his sexuality as it relates to other characters. The episode’s guiding question, then, is not how this character will come to terms with his homosexuality, but rather, how his homosexuality will affect the other characters in the series.

The “Pilot” episode from the short-lived series *Good News* takes a slightly different approach to gayness. Weinberger, the series creator, also wrote the episode. From the beginning, Weinberger imagined the show as one that would deal with social issues, much like the Norman Lear “relevance” series of the 1970s. As *All in the Family*’s

⁹⁷ McKinley, Interview.

producer-director Bud Yorkin is quoted in Todd Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time*, "Coming out of the sixties, the climate was right [for a show like *All in the Family*], the kids were letting it all hang out... : 'Quit jerking us off and give us something real.'" ⁹⁸ Much in that tradition, Weinberger wanted to deliver "something real" to *Good News*' viewers. He recalls, "I wanted [*Good News*] to deal with those issues. I thought it would be a fresh approach. Given that my hero was a minister, I wanted him to have a point of view that I thought was... forward and progressive, but most importantly, Christian." ⁹⁹

The issue with which the pastor deals is homosexuality as David, the son of a parishioner, approaches him for assistance with coming out to his mother. While Weinberger had written gay characters before (he was an uncredited creator of *Brothers* and also wrote a gay character on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*), he thought "in this case, given the setting of a black church, it had extra significance because it seemed to be a real issue; it certainly still *is* an issue for me." ¹⁰⁰ Ultimately then, because of his rootedness in "issues television," Weinberger also wrote a coming-out episode wherein David comes out twice – once to the pastor and once to his mother. In both instances, he comes out by specifically uttering the words, "I'm gay," supporting Joshua Gamson's assertion that homosexuality must be disclosed often. ¹⁰¹

While episodes featuring gay characters often deal with coming-out, they are also inherently predicated on the "surprise" of a character's coming-out. However,

⁹⁸ Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, 211.

⁹⁹ Weinberger, Interview.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Joshua Gamson, *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 70.

Weinberger, in some ways, displaces the surprise of coming out. While the pastor is undoubtedly surprised by the coming-out, the second coming-out is a non-event, one that is rooted in Incongruity theory. Because David has made a big deal of coming-out to his mother in the episode's first act, that she is unfazed by his admission results in humor. Rather than David's mother's being upset that he is gay, she is more disturbed that her son's boyfriend is white. As Weinberger details, casting the boyfriend with a white actor

was the satirical point for [David's mother] – it was far more a problem [but]... it was a comic truth as well. She knew he was gay since he was 8 years old... So her outrage... that's a comic position, but a true one. 'Why can't you go out and find a gay black man?' That's a comic point of view, but it's also saying something about her own prejudice and dealing with that.¹⁰²

On one hand, Weinberger perhaps has created one of the more progressive episodes to deal with homosexuality in the sense that David's homosexuality is not an issue that the characters within the series have to come to accept. Even as the episode was ostensibly about David's coming out as gay, Weinberger wanted to downplay any anti-gay sentiments within the episode (even as he experienced anti-gay sentiments from an extra and the actor for whom he initially wrote the part).

Race – or more precisely, an interracial relationship – is made problematic within the episode. Interestingly, this is the single episode in the sample of episodes for this chapter that was written by a white man, and it is also the only one to deal with the

¹⁰² Weinberger Interview.

problem of cross-racial dating. Erica Chito Childs posits that “stories about interracial unions problematize these relationships while denying that race matters and attempt to protect whiteness by constructing persons and communities of color as the problem...It is increasingly more common for individuals, families, and communities of color to be portrayed as the ones who oppose interracial unions.”¹⁰³ While Weinberger certainly attempts to culturally decouple homophobia and blackness, thus representing a progressive approach to gayness, he simultaneously continues to forward the notion that racism continues to exist because black people keep those ideologies alive.

The four writers in this chapter reveal the ways they struggled not only to make homosexuality visible within their episodes but also the ways they attempted to disrupt semiological linkages between gayness and femininity. Part of each writer’s project was to remove the “strangeness” from televisual black gayness and to push against the cultural work the very popular, although problematic, caricatures of black gay men found elsewhere on television, such as *In Living Color*’s “Men On...” sketches. However, even as they struggle to make black gayness visible in less problematic ways, they remain trapped by a television industry that understands gayness generally, and black gayness specifically, to be always and only concerned with coming-out. In the next section, I explore the industrial logics that these writers suggest precluded black gay characters from reappearing within the series on which they wrote.

¹⁰³ Erica Chito Childs, *Fade to Black and White: Interracial Images in Popular Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 9-10.

“We just... really didn’t have a need for that character”: Industrial (II)Logics and Black Gay Characters

As Tropiano argues with respect to white gay characters in white/multi-cultural-cast sitcoms, “Once the message is delivered, the gay character... typically disappears and, in most cases, is never seen, heard, or mentioned again.”¹⁰⁴ In *Good News*, *Moesha*, *All of Us*, and *Are We There Yet?*, once the initial episode (or episodes in the case of *All of Us*) wherein the gay character comes out as gay was done, the narrative utility of homosexuality had been exhausted. Although the character Weinberger wrote for the *Good News* pilot was the teenage son of one of the main characters, he only appears in the pilot and is never mentioned again (although the series only lasted one season/22 episodes). When asked, Weinberger suggested:

It wasn’t a decision to exclude him. It wasn’t the intention of the show to deal with gay issues in church or to deal with his issues in the church. Given the other characters, this was not either strongly delineated or a strong enough character to pursue. I thought we pretty much covered... you can obviously do far more stories with him, but considering the actors we had to serve, we just... really didn’t have a need for that character, and he didn’t really fit in. He was, no pun intended, really not a comedic character. He was a nice guy, and that was the point of the first episode... He didn’t have a comic characteristic and I didn’t want that. As we got

¹⁰⁴ Tropiano, *The Prime Time Closet*, 192.

into the series the story simply evolved around the other characters.

Nobody sat down and said, “Okay let’s not do gay anymore.” I couldn’t think of any more stories with him. I didn’t really choose to pursue it.¹⁰⁵

In other words, Weinberger suggests that (at least for him) there is no utility for gay characters once they have performed the narrative function of coming out. Homosexuality did not fit into the fabric of his show outside of creating the episodic narrative problem. Homosexuality, then, only has a place within *Good News* as a “very special episode.” Since the gay character came out to his mother and his pastor, he was no longer needed – his homosexuality could not be useful because (allegedly) homosexuality can only be problematized within the coming-out narrative. Further, Weinberger contends:

I thought [homosexuality] was an interesting issue to deal with, but it was not going to be *the* issue of the series in the way that *Will & Grace* would want. [Homosexuality] was the essence of that show basically, it was the predominant theme. I went on to other stories, which were guns, contraception, and a few other issues that I thought were interesting for the church or for this minister to deal with. I think it was just my inability or failure to find another gay issue that I wanted to deal with. And I didn’t really have the actor to do it. That was really a small part, and he did it really well, but it wasn’t a continuing role. He was never hired as an ongoing member of the ensemble. It wasn’t like we sat down and said...

¹⁰⁵ Weinberger, Interview.

we had no network comments that said, “Okay, no more gay characters or gay shows.” That was never an issue. It was really once in and out. I thought it was a very good pilot story. I thought it pointed out to some of the things that I thought were interesting. I thought it made a very good first show in a way of introducing the characters. To make gay or lesbian themes part of the series, that was never the intention... I guess if I had another year to go and I was able to find another story to deal with, I would have done it.¹⁰⁶

However, Weinberg never answers why the character he wrote could not have returned to the series (versus writing a new character). To suggest that he did not have the actor to play a gay character is to suggest that there were no new issues that could have been brought up for the same character, particularly considering that he was a child of one of the main characters. In addition, if Weinberger wanted to create additional story lines with the character, according to IMDB.com, Dwain Perry, the actor who played him, did not have his next role until two years after *Good News* had ended. Ultimately, Weinberger concedes that the lack of ongoing gay characters was rooted in his own lack of imagination to create/develop new stories for gay characters within the series that do not deal with coming out.

However, the same industrial (il)logic permeated Bady’s experiences on *Moesha*. He says:

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

I would try to bring Omar back. What was so fascinating is with the amount of respect that they gave to that script by not changing it and re-writing it, I didn't realize the way most black writers in particular think about the subject of gay characters as, "We did that story." That's what they would always say... What was interesting is I would always think, you know, being gay isn't a story. It doesn't begin and end with the opening credits and the last journal entry [as it did with the "Labels" episode]. I could never convince them that there was a life for the character beyond that particular story. I never won. It was always, "We already did that story." It was as if gayness in and of itself was a special interest story, an after-school special, but there was no life beyond that. There was no complexity.¹⁰⁷

McKinley and March's experiences on *All of Us* and *Are We There Yet?*, to an extent, differed. In both series, they suggest they wanted the gay characters to return to the series, but industrial factors made that difficult. In the case of *All of Us*, they considered bringing Luther back, but they contend that he was never written into another script because the series was cancelled in the season after he appeared. March says, "Absolutely we wanted to bring him and his boyfriend back. We just couldn't, the show had ended."¹⁰⁸

While cancellation was the reason suggested for the exclusion of a gay character on *All of Us*, the syndication schedule is the reason McKinley and March use for the

¹⁰⁷ Bady, Interview.

¹⁰⁸ March, Interview.

failure of Cedric to return as a character within the series. McKinley recalls that there was not even a discussion of bringing the character back. Because of the production schedule of *Are We There Yet?* wherein 100 episodes of the series were written and filmed in a short period of time, there were few recurring characters within the series. March recalls:

We would have loved for the character to come back but *Are We There Yet?* was made for syndication, so you can't really do continuous episodes. You can't have arcs. They have to be episodes that can stand alone. If you tune in [you have to] know who those characters are and know that there will be a beginning and end. I don't have to wait to see what happens next week. It's just because they don't know how they will run them. It was unfortunate because we had a lot of characters we would have loved to bring back.¹⁰⁹

March slips from a specific discussion of the exclusion of a recurring black gay character to a broader discussion of the inability for minor recurring characters within a made-for-syndication sitcom. In this way, March attempts to absolve the production staff and the television industry more broadly from charges of homophobia. In other words, March is unwilling to suggest that black gayness was wholly excluded from returning to the series; rather, that there were no recurring characters in the series because of the ways in which its production (and syndication) cycle operates. However, March's assertion is problematic because several minor heterosexual characters re-appear in some of the series' 100-episode run.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

The series in this chapter imagine black gayness in specific and pre-determined ways. According to episode writers, black gay characters can only be imagined within the writers' room in conjunction with the organizing logic of coming-out narratives. Bady, Weinberger, March and McKinley also suggest that showrunners determine which narratives are told within series. However, if their suggestion of an autobiographical nexus to their stories is true, it seems it is the *writers*, not necessarily the showrunners, who have a possessive investment in coming-out narratives. In the next section, I examine how these writers think (or hope) black gay characters will develop in contemporary television.

The Future of Black Gay Representation on Television

While all of the writers suggest that industrial constraints prevented them from bringing back particular gay characters for more than one-off appearances, they underscore that it is often prejudice, stereotype and a lack of imagination that industrially prevents such recurring characters within black-cast sitcoms. McKinley says writers "have to start developing shows for black gay characters outside of [coming-out]. The only way that could change is the character has to come back, that's the only way that it will change. So far it has been difficult. I think that's the challenge, getting that [black] gay character as a regular character." McKinley has attempted to engineer this revolution in black-cast television by writing more gay recurring characters into her scripts. But,

aside from the work writers want to do, still network executives sometimes remain resistant to a recurring or regular black gay character within black-cast sitcoms. McKinley says, “I had a gay character [in a pilot] that was a [recurring] character that’s now not gay.” McKinley recalls how network executives changed the character’s sexuality in her pilot episode. Because the network executives did not want to explicitly deal with homosexuality on a black-cast situation comedy, her two options were to either change the character’s sexuality or risk not having the pilot picked up. In this way, even as McKinley understands what must happen in order to shift the representational paradigm, industrial practices and ideas about an imagined black audience continue to create roadblocks to fuller representations of black gay characters within black-cast sitcoms.

Aside from their utility as the single or one of the providers of the narrative thrust for an episode by coming out, McKinley suggests black gay characters are also typically relegated to the comic relief role. The key to including more gay representations on television, according to McKinley, is to have characters who appear more often and more regularly within a series so that writers have to do more with them than simply have them come out as gay. “It almost has to be a character that when the opening credits roll, that character is right there... [Historically] gay characters would come in... to redecorate your living room and we’d never see them again. That’s not enough.”¹¹⁰

Bady concurred with McKinley’s assertion:

¹¹⁰ McKinley, Interview.

For black shows... they couldn't imagine a situation in which a gay character could sustain a series [like NBC's successful *Will & Grace*]... It hasn't changed much [since writing 'Labels' for *Moesha*]... I went to pitch over at BET. I was told by one of the people I was pitching, who was also gay, that I should not write any gay characters... That's their directive because [they think] their audience would never accept [a gay character], which I just think is ludicrous.¹¹¹

Bady suggests that this ideology has changed little since the time he was working on *Moesha*. As evidence, he recalls that when he worked on the VH1 series *Single Ladies* (2011 -), he had to fight for the recurring gay character on the series to have a romantic life that was made part of the series in the same way romance was central to the heterosexual characters' lives.

Bady says that even as there is a veritable explosion of gay characters across television, there remains apprehension about making such characters black. As GLAAD, the LGBT Media Advocacy Organization's 2013 "Where We Are on TV" report concluded, the number of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender characters on scripted television series has increased. While there are generally more of these characters on television than ever before, when LGBT characters of color are considered, only six of the 111 were black gay men: Luther on *Don't Trust the B---- in Apt 23* (2012 - 2013), Sam on *Smash* (2011 - 2013), Unique on *Glee* (2009 -), and Kaldrick, Christopher, and

¹¹¹ Bady, Interview.

Tariq on *The L.A. Complex* (2012).¹¹² When broadening out to the 701 LGBT characters on television during the 2012-2013 television season, black gay male characters comprised less than 1 percent of all representations.¹¹³

Weinberger echoes Bady's sentiments and adds that executives and those responsible for green-lighting and developing black-cast series have to expand the ways they think about black audiences and viewership. He says:

Here's the problem: the only people right now doing black-cast TV shows are TVOne and BET. There are black executives running those networks. I don't think they have encouraged gay black characters because they are fearful of alienating their audience. I think they're afraid that there is still a prejudice. TVOne did two gay characters on *Love That Girl* (2010 – 2012), but they weren't black. They were Hispanic. They could be allowed to be stereotypical without alienating the black audience. I have a feeling that if they tried to make those character black, they wouldn't have been able to get on the air.

Ultimately, both Bady and Weinberger suggest that the ways in which network executives imagine their viewership would need to change in order to have a more sustained development of black gay characters on black-cast sitcoms. But Weinberger rightly argues that the same kinds of prohibitions are not placed on black men portraying black women. He hypothesizes:

¹¹² While GLAAD places *Glee*'s Unique in the category of gay black men, the character should technically not be included because she considers herself transgender.

¹¹³ GLAAD Where We Are on TV Report – 2012 – 2013 (Los Angeles) 13. Retrieved from <http://www.glaad.org/files/whereweareontv12.pdf>

You can do a black man in a dress playing a woman, like Martin [Lawrence playing Sheneneh on *Martin*] or Tyler Perry playing Madea, and they love that, but if you do a “plain” gay character, you would have a problem getting past the network. They’re afraid of what their audience is going to say. They don’t want to [alienate] black fans. If you made [the gay character] black, you’d have a bit of a fight on your hands.¹¹⁴

However, even as Weinberger suggests a prescription for the conditions under which more black gay characters might be possible, his TVOne series *Belle’s* (2012-2013) did not feature any black gay characters, nor did he suggest that the black executives discouraged him from including such characters. In this way, although Weinberger posits that his years in the TV business and his position as a series creator give him a considerable amount of power, he does/did not have enough power to change the way network executives think and particularly think about black audiences.

Conclusions

This chapter explored authorship when writers are charged with writing episodes of black-cast sitcoms that feature black gay characters. The writers exercised a high degree of agency in the sense that they were integral in determining the broad sketch of the way a story developed. However, authorship remains both collective and negotiated. While the writers in this study pitched the ideas for their respective stories, the writers’ room contributes to the ways the story that makes it to television screens develops.

¹¹⁴ Weinberger, Interview.

However, it is often a negotiation. From Bady fighting to keep a public utterance of homosexual disclosure and a flamboyantly gay character out of his script to Weinberger's choosing to fire actors rather than compromise his authorial voice, there are fights that writers both win and lose.

The closet and a gay black character's "coming out" of it becomes an important and organizing ideological principle around which television writers – across different races, genders and sexual orientations – imagine gayness within black-cast sitcoms. Not only do these writers find the act of coming out of the closet an important and necessary part of the ways they tell black gay stories, "the closet" also contains and constrains the ways in which gayness can be imagined. As all of the writers expressed, few stories exist that either, in the case of Weinberger, they can think to write, or, as Bady suggests, showrunners will allow them to write. And when those stories can be imagined, as by McKinley and March, syndication practices and series cancellations provide the reasons that series do not revisit black gay characters.

While examining television production via the creative labor of its writers and producers is certainly productive, Tim Reid encapsulates the limits of television production. He says that even as a series creator and writer, there is "always somebody else you've got to answer to in network television... There's this guy and this guy's boss. Then that division and that division's boss. Then the network. Then the advertisers."¹¹⁵ And often, those higher on the television food chain affix certain ideologies to their presumed viewer that can often be out of sync with the actualities of said viewers.

¹¹⁵ Zook, *Color by Fox*, 6.

However, when representations of black gay men make it beyond the pitch, beyond the outline, beyond the script drafts and are finally broadcast to viewers, it is productive to examine what writers wrote, their authorial intentions and the struggles to get these representations on the air. Because of the very few broadly circulated images of black gay men in television, the writers are well aware of the burden these representations must carry. Therefore, even when they are not black gay men, they exercise caution in attempting to break down long-held tropes about homosexuality generally and black homosexuality specifically. The writers' in this chapter have certainly not written perfect episodes, but they do/did make black gayness visible on television – even if only for 22 minutes.

Chapter Two: Laughing Queens: Black-Cast Sitcoms and Black Gay Men as the Object of Humor

The sitcom is predicated, first and foremost, on being funny. To invert the very name of the genre, these series are, at their core, about comedic situations. There are characters within these series whose primary purpose is to either provide comic relief or provide the impetus for a comedic situation. This chapter argues black gay characters often embody the role of the comic in episodes of black-cast sitcoms and explores the ideological implications of such use of the black gay body. As Gust A. Yep and John P. Elia suggest, “because homosexuality is believed to be a threat to hegemonic black masculinity, it is often dismissed, laughed at, and violently rejected.”¹ It is this notion of laughing at homosexuality that this chapter explores.

This chapter asks: how do viewers know what is supposed to be encoded as “funny” and how have black gay characters in the black-cast sitcom been constructed in relation to idea(l)s about what is humorous? More specifically, it examines the laugh track as an element of post-production that can work to create a collective experience that instructs viewers about how they should feel/react to the presence of black gayness within a narrative universe. For sitcoms, the comic is often telegraphed via the laugh track. However, with the increased abandonment of the proscenium-style format for sitcoms featuring primarily white and multicultural casts, black-cast sitcoms have largely

¹ Gust A. Yep and John P. Elia, “Queering/Quaring Blackness in *Noah’s Arc*,” in *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television*, ed. Thomas Peele (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 35.

continued to utilize laugh tracks and/or live studio audiences to help create the notion of a collective experience with few exceptions including *Frank's Place* (CBS, 1987-1988), *The Bernie Mac Show* (2001 – 2006), *Everybody Hates Chris* (2005 – 2009), and *Belle's* (2012). Certainly, part of the reason black-cast sitcoms are shot differently than “quality” comedies like *Sex and the City* (1998 – 2004), *The Office* (2005 – 2013), *30 Rock* (2006 – 2013) and *Modern Family* (2009 -) is related to cost. Because of the expense associated with producing single-camera sitcoms, which often involves renting space in which to shoot the series, securing permits to film in public locations, and a considerably lengthier shooting schedule, proscenium-style shooting is a key component of the black-cast sitcom. According to Ted Magder, in 2005 the average cost of an episode of a 30-minute situation comedy was \$1.5 million.² More recently, *Everybody Hates Chris*, one of the few single-camera black-cast sitcoms, is estimated to have cost \$2 million per episode.³ Conversely, *Love That Girl!* (2010 -), a TV One proscenium-style sitcom cost roughly \$1.2 million for four episodes, which is roughly “half what one episode of a successfulish broadcast sitcom costs these days.”⁴ In addition to the cost savings, black-cast sitcoms’ continued use of more “traditional” sitcom characteristics allows for comic

² Ted Magder, “Television 2.0: The Business of American Television in Transition,” in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* eds. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouelette (New York: New York University, 2009), 147.

³ IMDB, “Everybody Hates Chris,” accessed July 15, 2013, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0460637/business>

⁴ Lisa de Moraes, “For black sitcom ‘Love That Girl!,’ TV One May be the Network of its Dreams,” *Washington Post*, January 6, 2010, accessed July 10, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/05/AR2010010503534.html>.

figures to be identified within the context of a series via either live studio audiences and/or the use of the laugh track.

The laugh track can provide important information about the ways series producers understand black gayness within the context of series and episodes. As discussed in the Introduction, many scholars have examined the ways black gay characters might be read with respect to stereotypes and controlling images. However, black gayness with respect to the laugh track has not been previously studied. A focus on the laugh track and humor theory can provide an opportunity to discuss the ways humor and nonverbal communication forms work to reify notions about black masculinity and trap black gay characters into particular tropes.

This chapter examines the ways in which humor and the laugh track encode the “comic” within four episodes of black-cast sitcoms that feature black gay characters. Employing discourse analysis, humor theory and theories about the laugh track, I examine episode of *Moesha*, *Good News*, *All of Us* and *Are We There Yet?* for the ways in which humor operates within these series to mark gayness as comical and, therefore, as the homosexual “other.”

In the next sections, I lay the theoretical foundation on which this chapter builds by examining the sitcom and humor theory. This framework helps to answer the major question this chapter undertakes: in what ways does reading the laugh track through humor theory signal ideologies about black gayness within the black-cast sitcom? Secondly, this chapter is interested in the ways that post-production decisions, laughter and homosexuality converge to make specific meanings.

The Sitcom and Humor Theory

The laugh track, which gestures toward a collective engagement among audience members and, thus, viewers at home, is important because it telegraphs what (or who) is funny. To fully understand the ways in which the laugh track might function, it is necessary to discuss humor theory. As Brett Mills argues, “humor exists in discourse, and its meanings are inevitably affected by, and are a result of, that discourse.”⁵ Thus, a useful starting point for understanding humor is discussing three of the major theories of humor: Superiority theory, Incongruity theory, and Relief theory. These three theories are most useful for the project I am undertaking in this chapter.

Superiority theory dates back to at least Plato and theorizes “that people laugh when they feel a kind of superiority over other people.”⁶ The theory argues that group laughter indicates the ways in which culture and people are uncivilized and, as a result, reveals the inner workings of humor. John Morreall posits “if the Superiority Theory is right, laughter would seem to have no place in a well-ordered society, for it would undermine cooperation, tolerance, and self-control.”⁷ However, we do not live in a well-ordered society; thus, the Superiority theory is a useful way to examine humor. Morreall posits Superiority theory is rooted in social, socioeconomic and cultural hierarchies and can be useful in understanding humor rooted in differences of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Supporting the idea that the Superiority theory of humor is rooted in

⁵ Brett Mills, *Television Sitcom* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 16.

⁶ Brett Mills, *The Sitcom* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, Ltd., 2009), 77.

⁷ John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2009), 7.

hegemony, Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik suggest, “all instances of the comic involve a departure from the norm, whether the norm be one of action, appropriate behavior, conventional dress, or stereotypical features.”⁸ The Superiority theory of humor is certainly concerned with being perceived as better than another, but it is also rooted in the ways one can be ridiculed for deviation from cultural normativity.

Incongruity theory, widely regarded as having its roots in Kantian philosophy, hinges on the notion that “humor is seen to arise from the disparity between the ways in which things are expected to be and how they really are.”⁹ Incongruity theory is built upon the assumption that as humans, we are somewhat like machines: we come to expect particular patterns and when things deviate from that pattern, they are inherently funny, mostly because they shock us with their deviation. Michael Clarke succinctly demonstrates how Incongruity theory works in three steps:

1. A person perceives (thinks, imagines) an object as being incongruous.
2. The person enjoys perceiving (thinking, imagining) the object.
3. The person enjoys the perceived (thought, imagined) incongruity at least partly for itself, rather than solely for some ulterior reason.¹⁰

Here too, Incongruity theory resides squarely within hegemonic constructions of the normative. Mills claims that within this theory, “comedy only makes sense to viewers

⁸ Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 67.

⁹ Mills, *The Sitcom*, 83.

¹⁰ Michael Clarke, “Humor and Incongruity,” in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 139-155.

who understand and accept what is ‘normal,’ for without such norms any incongruity is not sufficiently marked.”¹¹ In this way, the Incongruity theory and Superiority theory are related in that they are both used as a mechanism to separate hegemonic normativity from deviance. Both these theories can be applied to differences in race, class, gender, and sexuality in the black-cast sitcom wherein difference(s) is the primary vehicle for the “problem” of the week that must be solved within the 30-minute, three-act episode. With respect to the analysis I am conducting in this chapter, these two theories are of paramount importance. As I will discuss later, Superiority and Incongruity theory with respect to homosexuality help to underscore the ways the black gay body is marked as Other in relationship to blackness, generally, and black masculinity, specifically.

The third major theory of humor, Relief theory, is rooted in psychoanalytic theory, most famously articulated by Sigmund Freud. Relief theory claims that laughter fulfills “a vital role within the individual’s psyche in allowing repressed thoughts and ideas to be expressed in a manner less problematic than might otherwise occur.”¹² As with much of Freud’s work, laughter is theorized as deeply being connected to repressed desires. Simon Critchley asserts that within Freud’s Relief Theory, his “excessively hearty laughter in the bar with the boys at a series of aggressively homophobic gags would be read by Freud symptomatically as the expression of a repressed desire to [have sex] with some or maybe all of those boys.”¹³ Related to this notion of repressed desire Freud argues, “the sphere of sexuality and obscenity offer the amplest occasions for

¹¹ Brett Mills, *The Sitcom*, 87.

¹² *Ibid.*, 88.

¹³ Simon Critchley, *On Humor* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 96.

obtaining comic pleasures... [because] they can show human beings in their dependence on bodily needs.”¹⁴ Andrew Stott further argues “sexual themes amuse because some mask or elided aspect of the animal subject peeps through the civilized exterior and shows itself to be insatiable.”¹⁵ Relief Theory is most useful in discussing the laugh track. By using the idea of repression (minus necessarily the “sexual” part of repression), Relief theory can be argued to be concerned with difference. In summarizing Freud, Critchley suggests “in jokes, I laugh at others, find them ridiculous and myself superior.”¹⁶ Thus, Relief theory can in some ways be considered as not so much of a break from Superiority theory but as a companion that augments it with psychoanalytic theory.

These three theories help to illuminate the ways humor functions in the black-cast sitcom, a key component of the work in which this chapter engages. Of most importance here is the ways humor can be deployed to make an Other feel like an outsider, ridiculous, or insignificant. Using these theories of humor, in conjunction with theories about jokes helps us to understand the ways black gayness is ideologically positioned within black-cast sitcoms.

Freud understands jokes as the verbal manifestation of humor and develops a categorization through which jokes can be understood: they may be tendentious or non-tendentious. For Freud, tendentious jokes are those that tend to expose fears and inadequacies on the part of the person making the joke, while non-tendentious jokes are

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious* in *Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London, Vintage, 2001), 222.

¹⁵ Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 63

¹⁶ Critchley, *On Humor*, 96.

those that are, in his words, “innocuous.”¹⁷ Tendentious jokes require three people in order to operate successfully. “Apart from the one who is telling the joke, it needs a second person who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggression, and a third in whom the joke’s intention of producing pleasure is fulfilled.”¹⁸ Put simply, Freud theorizes that a producer, receiver and object are necessary to produce tendentious jokes. For this reason, Freud posits “the activity of joking cannot be said to have no aim or purpose, for it has set itself the unmistakable aim of arousing pleasure in the listener.”¹⁹ Tendentious jokes attempt to create a communal link between the producer of the laugh track and the receiver of the information that others think this situation is funny and is at the expense of the object, working to uphold hegemonic ideals regarding who/what is funny. Mills complicates the simple link between producer, receiver and object by noting that there are both insiders and outsiders when it comes to jokes. In other words, “people who knew each other well can find particular things funny which those outside of the group don’t. Such ‘in-jokes’ rely more on the workings of that group dynamic than the specifics of the joke that was uttered.”²⁰

When considering race and ethnicity, Christine Davies posits ethnic and racist jokes are not about despised groups per se; rather, they are told about groups who are in close proximity to the joke tellers, but who live at the margins of their culture.²¹ In other words, there is often a familiarity with the marginalized group about whom the racial

¹⁷ Freud, *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, 87.

¹⁸ Ibid., 97

¹⁹ Ibid., 93.

²⁰ Mills, *The Sitcom*, 15.

²¹ Christine Davies, *Ethnic Humor Around the World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996).

joke is being told. Put another way much earlier by Thomas Hobbes, jokes about race and ethnicity are a form of comic scapegoating wherein a person is found ridiculous and, as a powerless group, are laughed at by the powerful.²² Critchley adds to these claims by suggesting that ethnic humor is also concerned with putting one back in her/his rightful place, which places ethnic humor, as Davies and Hobbes suggest, within the Superiority theory of humor.

Mikhail Bakhtin is useful in his framing of the importance of space in relation to humor. While he could not have possibly discussed the sitcom when he was writing, his discussion of clowns and fools proves illustrative. He suggests within “the framework of class and feudal political structure [the clowns and fools] could be recognized without distortion only in the carnival and in similar marketplace festivals. They were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance.”²³ Extending Bakhtin to black gay characters in the black-cast sitcom, the episodes on which such characters appear can be understood as the carnival – the special event wherein black gay characters are used for specific goals – to make the audience laugh and simultaneously teach the characters a “lesson” that will assuredly be forgotten at the start of the next episode. However, the carnival (and by extension the black-cast sitcom) is not free from hegemony as it “sanction[s] the existing pattern of things and reinforce[s] it.”²⁴ In other words, once the clown and/or fool have entertained

²² Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature, English Works*, vol. 4, William Molesworth (ed.), (London, Bohn, 1841).

²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

the sitcom audience, his or her utility has been exhausted. One of the primary ways black gay characters' position within the black-cast sitcom is pointed out is via the laugh track.

The Laugh Track and the Sitcom

According to Jeremy Butler, the laugh track, simply stated, “constructs a virtual audience from recordings of real audiences. That is, all laugh tracks, even for shows recorded before studio audiences, are a mixture of sounds from various sources. If the actual audience does not provide enough laughter the sound editor can easily add more.”²⁵ Butler’s assertions illuminate two important points about the laugh track: first, the laugh track is created in post-production. Certainly, the idea is that, by its very nature, the sitcom is supposed to be funny and make its studio audience laugh, but if that is not the case, in post-production, laughter can be added to flag a joke that the studio audience either “did not get” or did not find funny. The reason to do this is to suggest to the home audience that other people think the events are funny. Second, Butler asserts that the laugh track constructs a collective experience. In a similar vein, Andy Medhurst and Lucy Tuck concur that the “use of an audible laugh track, the vestigial reminder of the music hall audience, [is] the electronic substitute for collective experience.”²⁶ In other words, it creates a sense of community among viewers and makes them feel that they are

²⁵ Jeremy Butler, *Television: Critical Methods and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 336.

²⁶ Andy Medhurst and Lucy Tuck, “Stereotyping and the Situation Comedy” in *Television Sitcom Comedy*, ed. Jim Cook (London: The British Film Institute, 1982), 45.

not alone. In this way, the black-cast sitcom, through its use of the laugh track, seeks (and demands) approval. Critchley argues “when I express my judgment of taste about an artwork, film or novel, then I require agreement of others, I crave assent.”²⁷ In this way, the laugh track functions as a kind of hegemony. As Antonio Gramsci reminds us, “the ‘normal’ exercise of hegemony... is characterized by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent.”²⁸ Critchley adds that “in laughing at a joke, I am also consenting to a certain ideal image of the world.”²⁹ In other words, the laugh track aims to force the viewer to understand something is funny while, at the same time, force audience’s consent to the collective experience of laughter.

Mills gestures toward the ways in which the laugh track assists audiences with decoding a televisual text. He asserts that the use of the laugh track “attempts to close down alternative readings of [a sitcom’s] content, by suggesting that if you’re not laughing at one of its jokes, then you’re the only one.”³⁰ Mills goes on to argue that “the mass of people heard laughing on a sitcom laugh track doesn’t just suggest that something is funny; it suggests that something is obviously, clearly, unarguably, unproblematically funny... laugh tracks don’t include responses from those who *didn’t* find a joke funny or were offended or upset by it.”³¹ As Mills argues, within the sitcom’s viewing audience, the audience is not seen, but only heard. And silence in a sea of

²⁷ Critchley, *On Humor*, 85.

²⁸ Antonio Gramsci, “Hegemony, Intellectuals and the State” in John Storey (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (Harlow: Longman, 2009), 75.

²⁹ Critchley, *On Humor*, 90.

³⁰ Mills, *Television Sitcom*, 51.

³¹ Mills, *The Sitcom*, 81.

laughter will not be heard nor recognized. To that end, David Marc forwards that the live, studio audience is “more conscious of being a part of the television program than of seeing one performed, and this creates an almost irresistible incentive for enthusiasm. The audience knows that its negative reactions are irrelevant and that its only possibility for participation is tied to approval.”³² Therefore, those who do not think a joke or situation is funny are silenced. Certainly there is the possibility of a heckler or someone who loudly “boos” a performance, but because the ultimate product is “recorded before a live studio audience” rather than aired live, the heckler can be escorted out of the taping and his or her heckling can be edited out of the footage and/or another take can be filmed.

Rick Altman importantly points to four functions of the television soundtrack in addition to cuing the spaces where humor exists. Three of these functions are useful for understanding the way the laugh track functions in the sitcom. Because of the ways in which television is watched – often viewers listen to the television from another room – Altman posits that the “sound track [should provide] sufficient plot or informational continuity even when the image is not visible.”³³ In addition, “there must be a sense that *anything really important* will be cued by the sound track... [and] the sound itself must provide desired information, events, or emotions from time to time during the flow.”³⁴ These three functions are useful in thinking about the laugh track. In the sitcom, the laugh track aurally signifies comedy if one is not actually watching, but only listening, to the

³² David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1997), 23.

³³ Rick Altman, “Television/Sound” in Horace Newcomb (ed.), *Television: The Critical View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 42.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

television. For the viewer at home, the laugh track (or “real” audience laughter) telegraphs something important is happening. Here, “import” can be understood as something funny; what is important for sitcoms is humor and eliciting an emotional response, namely laughter, in both the studio audience and the audience at home.

In this chapter, I examine four episodes of black-cast sitcoms that feature black gay characters. These episodes provide a fascinating case study of the ways the laugh track, in the absence of overt stereotypes of gayness, make gayness comic. In the next four sections, I examine the use of the laugh track with respect to the presence of black gayness within the episodes of *Moesha*, *Good News*, *All of Us* and *Are We There Yet?* I pay particular attention to the ways the heteronormativity (and norms related to black masculinity specifically) undergirds the stances these episodes take toward homosexuality within the black sitcom’s teleuniverse.

Homos are Funny: *Moesha*, Hetero/Homonormativity and the Laugh Track

The series *Moesha* began life on UPN in 1996 on the new network’s Tuesday night comedy block along with the short-lived series *Homeboys in Outer Space* (1996-1997). Having taken notice of the success its rival network The WB was having with its urban (read: black) comedies, UPN jumped at the chance to diversify its “drama-heavy

young male strategy.”³⁵ By its second season, *Moesha* was a bonafide hit for the network. The series’ second season episode, “Labels,” hinged on a set of heteronormative expectations. The episode, which aired on October 1, 1996, opened with Moesha (played by pop star Brandy Norwood) feeling down because she has recently broken up with her boyfriend, Q, and wants to find love again. When neighbor, Hakeem, introduces Moesha (and her family) to his cousin Omar, Moesha is immediately smitten. In his work on the sitcom, Mills argues that the genre problematically “position[s] heterosexual relationships as not only normal, but desirable.”³⁶ This investment in heterosexuality conditions viewer expectations. In this way, a handsome (presumably single) age-appropriate boy can be positioned within the realm of romantic possibilities for Moesha. Additionally, Omar does not display any of the markers that have become the shorthand by which gay characters have been recognized. In the absence of such markers, Omar is read as heterosexual and available as a romantic option for Moesha. Because of the expectations to which Mills gestures, the episode can exploit the viewer’s expectations for comedic purposes. The arithmetic that suggests a handsome, “unmarked” black man is a gay character does not compute; hence, it becomes the incongruity that prompts the “comedic situation” of the black-cast sitcom.

The First Act of the episode leaves Omar’s presumptive heterosexuality intact. While there are certainly clues that become clearer after his homosexuality has been revealed, there is no overt suggestion that he might be gay. In other words, by all

³⁵ Susanne Daniels and Cynthia Littleton. *Season Finale: The Unexpected Rise and Fall of the WB and UPN* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 107.

³⁶ Mills, *Television Sitcom*, 120.

appearances, Omar conforms to hegemonic forms of black masculinity. He accepts Moesha's invitation to go with her to a movie and agrees to pay for the popcorn and tickets. In addition, after he accepts Moesha's invitation, they hold hands as they leave the coffee shop. In the next scene, Moesha and Omar are at a restaurant after the movie. This scene continues to build the romantic tension between Moesha and Omar with him suggesting that while Moesha did not like the movie they saw together that he hopes they can go out to a movie again together. However, halfway through this scene (and about halfway through the episode) the laugh track begins to communicate that something is out of sync with heteronormative expectations. While much of the work is done within the script (a scene to which writer Demetrius Bady objected, as discussed in Chapter 1), the laugh track helps to underscore the incongruity of the situation that unfolds.

Omar and Moesha engage in conversation about the movie they saw together and ultimately Moesha says that she's "never had [a back and forth conversation] with a guy I like before." Omar responds by putting his head down and wringing his hands as if he is grappling with something. While his head is still down, a voice off-screen calls Omar's name in a lisping tone. Before the camera pans to reveal who has called him, there is audience laughter, suggesting that something is funny. When the camera finally does a glance-object cut from Omar to Tracey, the person who has called him, Tracey's lisping speech pattern and the reaction on Moesha's face indicates that Tracey is supposed to be read as gay. As the initial laughter dies down, it immediately begins again as Tracey says to Omar, "I thought that was you. Boy, I know you're not just going to sit there, give me a hug." As the two men embrace, the audience laughter/laugh track grows again. Part of

the audience's laughter originates from the incongruity of homosexuality within the series. As Anna McCarthy argues, "narrative development in sitcom [is] something of a hetero privilege."³⁷ While McCarthy is speaking broadly of the sitcom genre (and white-cast sitcoms more specifically, although she does not acknowledge this fact), her theorization can be adapted to the black-cast sitcom in that homosexuality is incongruous with the ways the black-cast sitcom functions. As such, the very presence of the homosexual "other" is comic because he does not fit within the narrow confines of permissible black televisual sexuality.

The laugh track works to "out" Tracey, which performs two functions. First, because of his relationship to Tracey, Omar's sexuality is narratively called into question although he has heretofore been positioned as a candidate for a romantic relationship with Moesha. Coupled with dialogue wherein Tracey asks Omar, "Why are you being so mysterious?," the scene raises a narrative hermeneutics of suspicion, which Lynne Joyrich theorizes is driven by heterosexual character's (and viewer's) desire to know another character's sexuality when it may deviate from heterosexuality.³⁸ Second, and somewhat related, the laughter within the scene creates a binary opposition that suggests the viewer is part of an "us" who believes in both the incongruity of "them" appearing within the confines of *Moesha* and the superiority they have over the homosexual "other." Laughter (whether intentional or not) implies that the one who laughs agrees

³⁷ Anna McCarthy, "'Must See' Queer TV: History and Serial Form in *Ellen*," in *Quality Popular Television: Cult TV, the Industry and Fans*, ed. Mark Jancovich and James Lyons (London: BFI, 2003), 92.

³⁸ Lynne Joyrich, "Epistemology of the Console," in *Queer TV: Theories, Historic, Politics*, ed. Glyn Davis and Gary Needham (New York: Routledge, 2009), 28.

with and supports the content of a joke. Mills believes “the laugh track is of significant ideological import because it represents social agreement on appropriate comic targets.”³⁹ Put another way, the laugh track constructs a type of televisual imagined community as well as those who are outside of it.

After Moesha’s date with Omar, she discusses her suspicions about Omar’s sexuality with her friends Kim and Niecy who, although she has asked them to keep it in confidence, spread the rumor around school. Moesha’s ex-boyfriend sees her at her locker and the use of the laugh track works to uphold the incongruity of homosexuality.

Moesha: What do you want?

Q: You know, if you really want to make me jealous. You might want to do that with a real man.

[audience laughter]

Moesha: What’s that supposed to mean?

Q: It’s all over school. Your boy Omar is soft.

[audience laughter]

The laugh track (and audience laughter) combines to make create a semiotic incongruity between a “real (black) man” and “soft”ness comments on hegemonic black masculinity. Soft, in this colloquial context, is meant to denote gayness with the assumption that “real black masculinity” is equated with hardness. However, more importantly than this semiotic incongruity is the ways that the laugh track is used to create what Freud calls a

³⁹ Mills, *The Sitcom*, 80.

tendentious joke, a kind of joke that barely contains, among other things, hostility.⁴⁰ Within *Moesha*'s narrative universe, homosexuality is construed as the foreign intruder that must be exposed, disciplined and discarded. In this way, then, the joke and the audience's laughter serve a corrective function. The joke here is meant to have an educative function: homosexuality is not to be tolerated. Even as Moesha offers that Q "could learn something from Omar about how to be a man," because there is no laugh track (or applause) after the line, there is no tacit agreement from the in-studio audience that would suggest a (presumably) gay man could teach a heterosexual man anything about masculinity.

Ultimately, Omar is not the homosexual other to whom the series directs its ire. It is Tracey to whom the series is most hostile. I suggest two reasons for this hostility. First, as I have been arguing, the series is heavily invested in heteronormativity. But secondly, and perhaps more importantly, as I discussed in Chapter 1, the series writer, Bady, is heavily invested in transcoding black gayness to attempt to disassociate it from its connection to femininity. As such, Tracey, and the brand of homosexuality he embodies, becomes more available as the site of humor. Not only does Tracey's gayness fail to conform to gender norms, it fails to abide by a gay politics of respectability that seeks to forward a post-gay rhetoric that suggests those who are gay conform to "proper" behaviors associated with gender normativity. The only ways in which these "respectable" gay subjects deviate from heterosexuality (and heteronormativity) is because of the gender of those to whom they are attracted.

⁴⁰ Freud, *The Joke and Its Relations to the Unconscious*, 94.

After Omar (and his cousin Hakeem) confront Moesha about spreading the rumor around school that Omar is (not “might be” but is) gay, Omar and Moesha have an altercation that tips the series’ hand with respect to how it feels about and deals with non-normative gayness.

Omar: Mo, why did you do that? [spread the rumor that he is gay around school]

Moesha: Omar, look... I... I... I didn’t say that you were anything. You know, I thought you were and apparently I was mistaken. And I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to say.

Omar: Well, you can say that the next time you’ll mind your own business instead of making up stuff like a stupid schoolgirl.

Moesha: Hold up. Hold up. Hold up. You know, I didn’t make up Tracey. Maybe Revlon did, but I didn’t.

(audience laughter)

The laughter in this brief scene underscores that while gayness might be ripe for the comic, it is a particular kind of gayness. If one behaves as heterosexual, as Omar does, then one is granted the leeway to be able to confront Moesha and suggest that she acted “like a stupid schoolgirl.” However, if one behaves as an effeminate gay then jokes, tendentious or not, are fully appropriate.

Moesha works within a set of expectations with respect to black maleness within televisual spaces. Black maleness is always already romantically (and sexually) available to black women within such spaces. When those expectations are betrayed, there is space for comedy to ensue. Importantly, the laugh track helps to sanction permissible

sexualities within the framework of the episode. While gayness is made the object of humor, it is also a particular kind of gayness that is made comic. Jokes are never told about Omar per se; rather, jokes are about the specter of gayness within Moesha's heterosexist narrative universe. When jokes are told about specific gay people, it is the gayness that most closely resembles the feminized black gay male that is constructed as "in bounds" with respect to humor and/or tendentious jokes. In this way, the humor about black gayness generally within *Moesha* remains problematic; it is the feminine gay man who is singled out as most troubling. In the next section, I discuss the ways that *Good News* uses humor to both decenter black gayness from the series' main narrative and underscore the discomfort that viewers should feel with respect to black gayness generally and black gay intimacy specifically.

Not Such Good News: Discomfort and Decentered Black Homosexuality in *Good News*

The UPN series *Good News* premiered on August 25, 1997, on the network's Monday night with other black-cast sitcoms *In the House* (NBC, 1995 – 1996; UPN 1996-1999) starring rapper-cum-actor LL Cool J, *Malcolm & Eddie* (1996-2000) starring Malcolm Jamal Warner of *Cosby Show* fame, and *Sparks* (1996-1998) which, like *Good News* was executive produced by Weinberger. The series was narratively centered on a church in South Central Los Angeles as it sought to install a new pastor. While the majority of the Pilot episode focuses on the new acting pastor's plight to hold on to the

church membership after a beloved pastor retired, it also includes a storyline that focuses on a young gay parishioner, Eldridge, who seeks Pastor Randolph's help in coming out as gay to his mother and her blessing to invite his boyfriend to church on Sunday.

While the synopsis of the episode's secondary plot seems to center gayness, the script and the laugh track reveal that gayness is actually decentered. About a third through the episode, Eldridge approaches Rev. Randolph and asks for his help. As the pastor attempts to avoid dealing with homosexuality, the laugh track/audience laughter suggests that there is a tacit agreement with Rev. Randolph's desire to avoid the topic. After telling Eldridge how much he likes to help young people with their problems, he asks:

Rev. Randolph: Now tell me. What is the problem?

Eldridge: I'm gay. [audience laughter]

Rev. Randolph: [after a long pause] You know Eldridge, I'm only the acting pastor. Maybe you could call Pastor Douglas [the recently departed previous pastor] [takes Eldridge's arm and attempts to lift him out of the chair].
[audience laughter]

Eldridge: I couldn't talk to Pastor Douglas about this. Besides, that's not my problem. You see, for the first time in my life, I met a young man who I like and he likes me.

Rev. Randolph: Well, Eldridge tell you what (audience laughter). I'll pray on it and you pray on it, and come back in a couple of weeks, and maybe we can talk about it [audience laughter].

Eldridge: This can't wait a couple of weeks. And anyway, that's not my problem either.

Rev. Randolph: It's not?

Eldridge: I want to bring him to church with me this Sunday.

Rev. Randolph: Well, Eldridge. I can understand two Christian, God-loving *friends* should worship together. It's not like you'll be sitting there holding hands... [leans in to Eldridge] Will you? [audience laughter]

Eldridge: No sir.

Rev. Randolph: [walking toward his office door to open it to see Eldridge out] Well, then bring him here, and I will do my best to see that he feels welcome.

Eldridge: Thank you, but that's not really the problem either.

Rev. Randolph: Well, we getting any closer to it? [audience laughter]

Eldridge: Well, I want you to help me tell my mother.

Rev. Randolph: [closes door] What part? [audience laughter]

Three things are important to note with respect to this scene and its use of the laugh track. First and foremost, the laughter in the scene is primarily centered on Rev. Randolph's reactions to Eldridge's escalating list of issues with which he is seeking the pastor's help. With the exception of Eldridge announcing that he is gay, all of the laughter comes after one of Rev. Randolph's lines of dialogue. In this way, the laughter works to decenter Eldridge's experiences in favor of a heterocentrist positionality that creates gayness as something strange within the narrative universe of *Good News*.

Second, Eldridge seeking help from the pastor is positioned as a "problem." In addition, the humor in this scene is predicated on Eldridge driving the disclosure of his problems. In other words, Eldridge is given three opportunities to reveal his problem, which, simply put, is that he wants the pastor's help telling his mother that he is gay and wants to bring his boyfriend to church. However, for comedic purposes, the set of "problems" is parsed out over the course of the scene. In this way, Eldridge, and black

gayness by extension, is positioned as the “problem” that needs to be solved within the course of the 22-minute episode.

Third, the scene exposes a key issue with respect to gay television representation. As what Becker calls the “gay 90s” began, it was not uncommon for gay men and lesbians, both black and white, to appear on television programs.⁴¹ However, what becomes (and remains) problematic with gay representation broadly, and black gay representation specifically, is that black gay characters are temporarily accepted into the fold of heteronormative black-cast sitcom worlds provided that they do not express sexual desire. Rev. Randolph stands in for a black public that *might* be comfortable with black gay people, but who are certainly not comfortable with black gay sexuality. Hence, when there is a discussion of the possibility that Eldridge might want to hold hands in church with his boyfriend, there is cause for anxiety. The laugh track uncovers the nervousness associated with black gayness. Critchley argues part of nervous laughter is rooted in the notion that “we often laugh because we are troubled by what we laugh at, because it somehow frightens us.”⁴² I suggest the insertion of the laugh track is meant to express feelings of discomfort because same-sex sexuality has not been a part of the narrative universe of black-cast sitcoms or *Good News* up to this point. Additionally, this laughter engages in the act of allusion. As Freud theorizes, when jokes use allusion, they replace “something small, something remotely related that the listener can construct in

⁴¹ Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

⁴² Critchley, *On Humor*, 56-57.

his imagination into a full and plain obscenity.”⁴³ In this case, the question about two gay men holding hands suggests sex between two men, which is constructed as wholly out of step with not only the narrative rules of *Good News* but also within hegemonic culture and is thus rendered “obscene” and as the “Other.”

In addition, the ways in which the humor functions in this episode can be understood as tendentious. The jokes in this scene, as Freud argues is true of all tendentious jokes, “requires three persons: apart from the one who is telling the joke, it needs a second person who is taken as the object of the hostile aggression... and a third person in whom the joke’s intention of producing pleasure is fulfilled.”⁴⁴ In this way, Freud suggests there is a symbiotic relationship between the joke teller and the joke receiver (understood here as the audience/laugh track) with the third person as the abject object. For *Good News*, the first position is occupied by the fully heterosexual starring and recurring cast while the second position is occupied by the viewing audience (for whom the laugh track acts as a stand-in), and the third position is occupied by the gay guest star and homosexuality generally.

When Eldridge finally comes-out to his mother later in the episode, homosexuality is decentered because the new problem is that his boyfriend is white. I return to this scene in Chapter 3 in conjunction with a discussion of audience reception. However, it is important to note here that the laugh track ultimately demonstrates two things with respect to black gayness in *Good News*. First, it works to decenter gayness from an episode that ostensibly deals with the subject within its secondary story. Second,

⁴³ Freud, *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, 97.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

it underscores the discomfort (and the agreement with such discomfort) with respect to black gayness within black communities. In the next section, I discuss the ways that *All of Us* marks those who are “inside” of heteronormativity and those who are “outside” with respect to its deployment of humor, the laugh track and the black gay body.

“Are You Sure?”: The Laugh Track and Insider/Outsider Humor in *All of Us*

All of Us premiered on UPN on September 16, 2003. The series was the brainchild of husband and wife team Will and Jada Smith. The series centered around the “the trials and tribulations of blended families” and was partly inspired by the Smiths’ experiences with extended families.⁴⁵ The series was paired on UPN’s Tuesday night alongside established series *One on One* (2001-2006) and new, short-lived series *Rock Me Baby* (2003) and *The Mullets* (2003-2004).

The fourth-season episode “My Two Dads,” which aired on November 20, 2006, concerns series star Robert (played by Duane Martin) discovering that the man who raised him as his son was not his biological father. More importantly for the purposes of *Trapped in a Generic Closet*, he discovers that his biological father is gay. In the episode previous to “My Two Dads” entitled “Like Father, Like Son... Like Hell,” Robert finds his biological father, Luther (played by Richard Lawson). As Luther and his father get to know one another, they bond over a mutual love for basketball, and Luther reveals that he

⁴⁵ Daniels and Littleton, *Season Finale*, 304.

once played basketball, like his biological son. Sports, as an arbiter of hegemonic masculinity, do not cohere with older stereotypes of gayness. This connection between Luther's love of/participation in basketball coupled with his failure to display any of the semiotic markers of gayness, appears to remove the possibility of homosexuality from the realm of expected narrative possibilities. In this way, later in the scene when Luther and his partner share a brief kiss, the laugh track begins to work as it does within the superiority tradition of comedy. When the two men kiss, the only reaction heard from the laugh track is laughter. There is no "ooing" or anything that might suggest that this kiss is necessarily shocking. While part of the laughter may originate as a kind of nervous laughter, it more closely works, as comedy in the superiority tradition does, to "correct mistakes and short-comings, not to foster them."⁴⁶ In this instance, I submit that the mistake or shortcoming the episode attempts to correct is homosexuality generally, and specifically the display of same-sex intimacy. This kiss, and the audience's reaction to it, is the way the episode concludes, with a "to be continued..." slate, leaving the viewer to wait for the "correction" to take place in the "My Two Dads" episode. In addition, Critchley says humor "is a form of cultural insider-knowledge, and might, indeed, be said to function like a linguistic defense mechanism... [that] endows native speakers with a palpable sense of their cultural distinctiveness, or even superiority."⁴⁷ The laughter as Luther and his partner kiss confirms the distinctiveness and superiority of the assumed heterosexual viewer over Robert.

⁴⁶ Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 8.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

The episode prelude of “My Two Dads” devolves into a series of jokes told at the expense of gayness – jokes that draw heavily on the discomfort associated with same-sex intimacy, a heterosexist understanding of gay relationships, and punch lines that are punctuated via the laugh track added in post-production (as the series is taped on a soundstage without a live, in-studio audience). For example, after the “Like Father, Like Son... Like Hell” episode recap (which ends with the kiss between Luther and his partner Roosevelt), the first line of dialogue as Robert and his friend Dirk drive back to their home is Dirk’s proclamation, “Wow!” which is punctuated by the laugh track. Then, as Dirk recounts that he just saw two gay men kissing “right on the mouth,” another round of laughter from the soundtrack can be heard. These recorded reactions to the presence of same-sex intimacy are designed largely to express the absurdity of two men kissing “right on the mouth.” As Freud argues, tendentious jokes exist “simply and solely in the absurd mode of representation, putting what is usually reckoned to be the lesser in the comparative and taking what is regarded as the more important as positive.”⁴⁸ In this exchange, I argue, same-sex intimacy is regarded as absurd because it is deemed as outside of the bounds of hegemonic displays of sexuality.

Shortly after this exchange, Dirk asks if “it makes me gay ‘cause I couldn’t turn away?” This utterance gives way to laughter that I forward, is rooted in a fear of the homosexual other within. In E. Patrick Johnson’s critique of the rhetorics of black Nationalism, his suggestion that the black homosexual is disavowed to “maintain the fiction of a coherent black male heterosexuality and to assuage the specter of the

⁴⁸ Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, 89.

homosexual Other within” is useful here.⁴⁹ The psychoanalytic approach Johnson forwards here suggests that a part of the humor in Dirk’s question is that there is a *real* fear that homosexuality exists within him. The laughter track suggests that viewers should also share this fear.

The last joke in the episode prelude centers on gender roles and the ways that a heterosexual understanding of homosexuality (and same-sex relationships) hinges on mapping heterosexist assumptions onto such relationships. Dirk asks, “Which one you think is the chick?” The laugh track suggests the foolishness of the question being asked while also, as the black gay participants in the reception study will discuss in Chapter 3, underscoring that this episode, like the majority of television art, assumes that the viewer is heterosexual and that this is a question they have pondered with respect to same-sex relationships. As such, as Mills forwards, “the sound of laughter is important because it is an aural sign of assent: to make the noise of laughter is to support the content of a joke... This means that it is precisely the *noise* of laughter which matters, for it communicates an agreement to be part of a group.”⁵⁰

The first scene after the episode prelude finds Robert back at home. The audience has insider knowledge about Robert having discovered that his biological father is gay, knowledge no one within the series (other than Robert’s friend Dirk) has. When Bobby, Jr., Robert’s son, enters the room with a gallon of milk and says “homo” as he is attempting to pronounce the word homogenized, the laugh track is heard, which signals a

⁴⁹ E. Patrick Johnson *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 32.

⁵⁰ Mills, *The Sitcom*, 81

set of insider knowledges between Robert and the audience, who are “in the know” with respect to why the word “homo” might be funny. As Mills posits, “finding things funny often relies on a number of aspects which are not contained within the actual comic moment itself, and so humor can be seen as a communicative act whose context is vital to its success.”⁵¹ The context on which this comic moment wrests hinges on information the viewer has seen the previous episode (or the recap) – that Luther is a “homo.” Without such knowledge, a child uttering “homo” as he attempts to sound out the word “homogenized” ceases to be funny.

When Luther arrives, unannounced, at Robert’s house, Robert reveals that he has no issue with the “gay thing,” partly because he works in television with gay people. However, his description of his alleged “gay friends” can be read as offensive as he calls refers to them as “super gay” (small audience laughter), “tiara gay” (bigger audience laughter), and “Judy Garland gay” (biggest audience laughter). Here again, with the presence of Luther, who represents the “respectable” gay body – a body that does not display the outward markings by which gayness is assumed to be readable on the body including speech patterns, styles of dress and/or mannerisms – those who do not fit within the realm of the hegemonically masculine gay man are opened up as a permissible site for humor, laughter and mockery. Because “super gay,” “tiara gay” and “Judy Garland gay” all seem to refer to a feminized gay man (particularly “tiara gay”), the laughter works within the Superiority theory of humor, while simultaneously expressing a

⁵¹ Ibid., 15-16.

corrective function that polices the boundaries within which black gayness will be (temporarily) allowed within the heteronormative space of *All of Us*.

Later in the same scene, Luther's presence as a "respectable" gay body becomes explicitly underscored through the use of the laugh track. Robert's adoptive father cannot believe that Luther is gay. He asks his wife, "*He's gay?*" When she confirms, he first asks her, "Are you sure?" which is met with a small amount of audience laughter. When she again confirms, he turns to Luther and asks, "Are *you* sure?" which is met with a bigger laugh from the laugh track. Finally, before he leaves the room to leave Robert and Luther alone to talk, he says, "But he doesn't look gay to me" (audience laughter). In this way, the laugh track gestures toward an agreement with the line of questioning that Robert's father is undertaking. Because Luther does not subscribe to the ways in which gay bodies have historically been read in media, the responses to his embodiment of gayness is made problematic and incomprehensible in many ways. On one hand, Luther troubles the ways that black gayness has been mediated within television. On the other hand, it is all the more reason that his body, with its confusing refusal to embody "negative" stereotypes of gayness, must be expunged from *All of Us's* televisual universe.

All of Us uses the laugh track in two broad ways: First, it seeks to mark the comic within the context of the episode, and second, it marks the line between those inside and outside with respect to jokes, humor and mockery. In the final section of this chapter, I analyze the ways in which *Are We There Yet?* builds on the groundwork laid in the previous three episodes analyzed to mark gayness as different, foreign and expungable.

Humor, Black-Cast Sitcom Style: *Are We There Yet?* and Laughing at Difference

Are We There Yet? premiered in 2010 as TBS was re-igniting its foray into original programming. *Are We There Yet?* was greenlit with a 10/90 deal, which includes production of 10 episodes and, provided the episodes reach a pre-determined audience rating, 90 additional episodes are ordered to ensure that the series will reach the 100 episodes needed for syndication. The first such deal the network struck was with Tyler Perry Studios for production on *House of Payne* and *Meet the Browns*. *Are We There Yet?*, based on the 2005 film of the same name, centered on the Kingston-Persons household and their issues coping as a blended family with two teenagers.

The *Are We There Yet?* (2010 – 2012; TBS) episode “The Boy Has Style” is the sixth episode of the show’s second season. The series, while shot proscenium-style, was not shot in front of a live studio audience. Rather, the audience laughter was simulated in post-production. While certainly “live” laughter can be removed and/or positioned differently in post-production, the laugh track suggests an artificiality about the laughter. In other words, the laughter is not heard when living, breathing humans think something is funny; rather, it is/can be inserted at spaces where the post-production crew believes comedy exists. In this way, as Antonio Savorelli argues, “the laugh track highlights comic moments, fulfilling the meta-comic function of positively sanctioning their

effectiveness and, at the same time, the pragmatic function of ‘educating’ the possible television audience to recognize the show’s comic style.”⁵²

The episode title, “The Boy Has Style,” can suggest that its humor originates from the incongruity approach by telegraphing discord between black heterosexual masculinity and notions of style/modes of dress. Mills claims that humor via incongruity “makes clear how important expectations and norms are to humor, for unless a viewer understands the way things are ‘meant to be,’ incongruity will be unnoticeable and laughter will not occur.”⁵³ While the word “style” does not necessarily have a connotative meaning rooted in sexuality, in its deployment here, the word’s very ambiguity helps to place heterosexuality and homosexuality in tension with one another, and as a result becomes the basis for the comedy within the episode. In “The Boy Has Style,” the ambiguities between clothing and gayness are exploited for comedic purposes.

When Cedric, the black gay character, is introduced in the episode, he is costumed in a pink argyle sweater and is carrying a messenger bag. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, the episode writers participated in costuming the character in specific ways. Because of their involvement in costuming as well as script writing, Cedric’s clothing becomes the basis for humor within the episode, as demonstrated in the dialogue that follows his departure. As the family matriarch (Suzanne) and patriarch (Nick) grapple with an “is he or isn’t he” dilemma, the laugh track helps to identify the spaces within which the comic exists.

⁵² Antonio Savorelli, *Beyond Sitcom: New Directions in American Television Comedy*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Press, 2010), 22.

⁵³ Mills, *The Sitcom*, 83.

Nick: How is he gay?

Suzanne: Did you see that sweater and that murse?⁵⁴ [Laughter]

Nick: A sweater and a bag does not make a man gay.

Suzanne: Well, that ensemble [with the French pronunciation] was certainly giving it a shot. [Laughter]

Nick: The boy's a football player.

The dialogue here accomplishes two things. First, it positions homosexuality as something that can be detected via fashion, relying on the historical ways in which clothing and colors mapped gayness onto the bodies of gay characters. For Suzanne, Cedric's pink sweater and murse mark gayness in a way that belies any other markers that may prove contrary, like his extracurricular participation on his high school's football team. Second, the addition of the laughter works to identify what is funny; in this case, it is the ways in which Cedric's style of dress deviates from the ways characters within the show have defined normative men's fashion. Importantly, because the laugh track is understood as group laughter, dissenting voices are literally and figuratively silenced. Even if someone in the audience "boos," the implication is that "queer clothing" is considered as a source of humor, that dissent can be edited out before the final broadcast. In other words, the suggestion here is that "everyone" thinks reading clothing for degrees of gayness is funny. The dialogue continues:

Nick: You cannot be that tall and be gay. [Laughter]

Suzanne: I'll call RuPaul and let him know. [Laughter] When Lindsey came downstairs he said, "I love that dress."

⁵⁴ A "murse" is a colloquial reference to a messenger bag, which is created from the contraction of the phrase man's purse.

Nick: She looked good in it.

Suzanne: Exactly, you said she looked good in it. He said I love that dress.

In this dialogue, there is a slippage between ideas about homosexuality and drag queens in terms of clothing choices, similar to the ways in which *Soap* exploited presumed cultural slippages between the two. In one line, Suzanne mentions RuPaul, perhaps the world's most famous drag queen, and in the next line she mentions Cedric's love of Lindsey's dress rather than his admiration of how she looked *in* the dress. In this way, Suzanne makes a cognitive connection between gayness and cross-dressing, which goes unchecked. This can also be read as making a connection between gay men's desire for wearing "women's" clothing and Cedric's choice of a sweater in a "woman's" color (e.g. pink). In these cases, comedy is found in the incongruity of the hegemonic expectations placed on men and masculinity. Mill posits that "the pleasure from laughter... comes from the surprise of confounded expectations and laughter is the oral expression of such surprise."⁵⁵ In other words, hegemonic black masculinity and hegemonic femininity in style of dress are incongruous, thus they elicit laughter (whether "real" laughter or "canned" laughter). The arithmetic that equates masculinity with particular styles of dress results in a "computer error" in this scene. Cedric upends expectations and, as hegemony does, it must reconcile Cedric's positionality as an "Other" with relation to hegemonic black masculinity.

Nearly half of the episode traffics in questions about Cedric's sexuality. Midway through the episode, Nick can no longer handle the ambiguity and asks Cedric: "Are you

⁵⁵ Mills, *The Sitcom*, 82.

gay?” The insertion of the laugh track and a commercial break follows the question. The commercial break here is designed to create a sense of drama. On one hand, Cedric’s sexuality is one of the central questions in the episode to which the answer is about to be revealed. On the other hand, the episode creates a sense of drama from what *should* otherwise be a very private matter: one’s sexuality.

The laugh track, then, suggests two functions. First, it is, following Relief theory, meant as a “release of pent-up nervous energy.”⁵⁶ The question about Cedric’s sexuality is one that the viewer is meant to care about not only because they are nosey viewers. Rather, it is because of knowing that Cedric’s sexuality creates particular expectations for his relationship with Lindsey, one of the series’ major characters. The nervous energy released, then, suggests more about the fate of Lindsey’s love life than about Cedric’s sexuality. Second, the idea that one might be homosexual within a series that otherwise has a possessive investment in heterosexuality seems outside the realm of possibility. Therefore, the comedy ensues from the “felt incongruity between what we know or expect to be the case, and what actually takes place.”⁵⁷ In this way, as Savorelli suggests the laugh track “textualizes the comic effect and makes it explicit.”⁵⁸ The comic then, is rooted in the notion that viewers might be confronted with homosexuality in a space they think is isolated from it.

⁵⁶ Critchley, *On Humor*, 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁸ Antonio Savorelli, *Beyond Sitcom*, 23.

Conclusions

The four series' episodes analyzed in this chapter demonstrate the importance of the laugh track as an element of the production aesthetic and ideological tool for black-cast sitcoms in the 21st century. While only one of the series was shot in front of a live studio audience, the laugh track suggests a rootedness in the traditional conventions of the genre as well as a way to telegraph where the humor exists within an episode. The laugh track also performs the role of creating community – a community that excludes gay people – and sometimes the separation is hostile, while at other times the separation is simply rooted in difference.

Ultimately, there is no single way black-cast sitcoms make black gayness comic. However, black-cast sitcoms heavily rely on three of the major strategies of humor as noted in the Superiority, Incongruity and Relief theories. In this way, these series can never be pinned down for a particular approach to humor; they shift their shape depending on the lead writer and the objectives the episode hopes to convey.

Humor and the laugh track come together to make homosexuality not only strange but comical in their narrative universes. They converge to suggest that these story worlds are a “heterosexuals only” universe. The actors who play the parts are heterosexuals pretending to be gay (or they are at least not openly gay), which provide an insulation for dealing with “real” gays in gay guest-starring roles, who might object to the tenor of the humor within the episodes. Without an authentic “outsider,” the narrative is free to engage in humor rooted in Superiority, Relief, and/or Incongruity theories. Casting

presumably heterosexual actors as black gay characters within episodes maintains the social contract needed for this humor to exist. In other words, for the tendentious jokes that these episodes most often deploy to work, they need three people. While the “object” of humor is always part of the tendentious joke’s operation, by removing the specter of a “real” gay person, the jokes work more successfully.

Ultimately, the laugh track serves a socialization function. When paired with black gayness in the black-cast sitcom, the laugh track (and laughter) creates the boundaries and the terms within which gayness can exist in the black-cast sitcom’s diegesis. While black gay male characters are ultimately (and begrudgingly) accepted into the narrative fold on *Moesha*, *Good News*, *All of Us*, and *Are We There Yet?*, they are discarded just as quickly. Gayness is ejected from the (hetero) normative universe of the series because it is connected with deceit and belies expectations of heterosexual/ist romantic pairings. However, even as *Good News* and *Are We There Yet?* are more narratively welcoming of the gay “intruder,” ultimately these characters are never heard from again because after they have come out and have demonstrated the “enlightened” ways of the core cast, their narrative function has been exhausted. These characters remain trapped in the black-cast sitcom closet – only to be trotted out when they can be laughed at and positioned as the homosexual, comedic “other.”

Chapter Three: Making Black Gay Meaning: Black Gay Men, Audience Studies, and Black-Cast Sitcoms

Media does not simply do things to people. Contrary to the “hypodermic needle” models of media effects, the people who sit in front of their television sets, computers, tablets and smart phones consuming content are engaging in one way or another with media images. As they engage with media, they can make meaning from the images that flash across their screens. These images are often important, particularly for people of color and sexual minorities, because television can be a way for them to see images of themselves.

This chapter asks in what ways black gay men make meaning from black-cast sitcom images of black gay characters. In addition to their own meaning-making processes, which are certainly valid, I want to put their meanings in conversation with the meanings the episode writers discussed in Chapter 1 with respect to their episodes. This chapter is particularly interested in how black gay men understand gay black representation, paying attention to the ways stereotypes have helped to shape the ways they understand the media industries’ relationship to black gay representation. Put simply, my aim in this chapter is to understand the ways black gay men decode images of gay black male characters within episodic black-cast sitcoms.

Methodologically, this chapter analyzes 10 in-depth interviews with black gay men. Employing qualitative interviews, my goal in this chapter is not to create a set of data that can be extrapolated across all black gay men. Rather, borrowing from

ethnographic methodologies, I engage deeply with fewer respondents to garner richer data.

This chapter first engages with the pertinent literature on audience studies generally and audience and reception studies as related to race, gender and sexuality specifically, before turning to the findings from the sample. The scholars discussed below are important to understand the major bodies of research as related to audience studies. A synthesis of this research helps to understand the ways scholars have understood audiences in order to bring these literatures to bear on black gay audiences since there has been little research conducted on this audience segment. I bring the research on audience studies, as well as audience studies related to race and sexuality together to create the theoretical scaffolding on which this chapter is built.

It is important to note that I am not seeking to generalize the findings across all black gay men – or all black gay men in Chicago and Detroit for that matter. To do so with 10 respondents would be impossible. Rather, I am providing a snapshot of the ways this particular group of black gay men understood black gay male images in four black-cast sitcoms: the *Moesha* episode, “Labels,” the *Good News* “Pilot” episode, the *All of Us* episode in “My Two Dads,” and “The Boy Has Style” from *Are We There Yet?*.

Studying Audiences

Audience research has been an important part of media studies for seemingly as long as media has existed. To suggest that television viewers are active agents is not a

radical act, unlike what some studies measuring media effects have purported. As Janet Staiger neatly synthesizes, this research has largely been driven by “fears of effects, especially couched in language about unformed, ill-formed, or weak minds, most often projected as belonging to children, the working class, immigrants, and women.”¹ Additionally, this research often suggests that these presumed unformed, ill-formed, and/or weak minds are also passive minds, unable to distinguish “good” from “bad” and that these people allow media to do things to their “passive” minds.

However, John Fiske writes, when researchers understand viewers as active, it allows for the recognition that “the social subject has a history, lives in a particular social formation... and is constituted by a complex cultural history that is both social and textual.”² David Morley adds, “the audience must be conceived of as composed of clusters of socially situated individual readers, whose individual readings will be framed by shared cultural formations and practices pre-existent to the individual.”³ In this way, Morley gestures toward the ways axes of identity may structure how meaning is made and suggests that there is value in studying the reception practices of those who are raced, gendered, classed, sexually oriented and aged as a means to understand the ways their axes of identity shape how they make meaning. Morley’s call for studying the reception practices of those who are not white and heterosexual underpin the work this chapter undertakes.

¹ Janet Staiger, *Media Reception Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 165.

² John Fiske, *Television Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 62.

³ David Morley, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 54,

While Ien Ang cautions that just because audiences represent multiple positionalities and are active, they are not necessarily always critical.⁴ This realization of the (perhaps) lack of critical engagement with television is partly rooted in the notion that television viewers are not always *only* engaged with television. As Dorothy Hobson found in her study of families watching the soap opera *Crossroads*, women, in particular, often performed domestic duties while watching television, sometime settling for listening to the television from another room.⁵ Additionally, Patricia Palmer, in her study of children and their viewing habits, found that children watch with varied attention spans ranging from total absorption to “monitoring” the television while engaging in other activities, like doing homework.⁶

However, the active reader remains an important intervention and underpins Stuart Hall’s now-famous encoding/decoding model. Hall’s model springs forth from his understanding that “the ‘object’ of production practices and structures in television is the production of a *message*: that is... sign-vehicles of a specific kind organized... through the operation of codes within the syntagmatic chains of discourse.”⁷ Hall wanted to investigate the ways “sign-vehicle” organization affected the communication process. For Hall, three reading positions can result from this process: dominant/hegemonic,

⁴ Ien Ang, *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 12.

⁵ Dorothy Hobson, *Crossroads: Drama of a Soap Opera* (London: Methuen, 1992).

⁶ Patricia Palmer, *The Lively Audience: A Study of Children around the TV Set* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986).

⁷ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding in the Television Discourse,” in *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, ed. Darnell M. Hunt (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 46.

negotiated and oppositional.⁸ The way the reading positions will be articulated within this chapter is that a dominant reading dovetails with the intentions of the episode writers, as detailed in Chapter 1. Hall's negotiated reading position "acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level... operates with exceptions to the rule."⁹ This reading position finds both moments to interpret as the author desired or to interpret the moments differently. Lastly, the oppositional reading finds the reader almost fully rejecting the preferred encoded meanings of a text and creating "some alternative framework of reference" in order to make meaning.¹⁰ The oppositional reading position, as deployed in this chapter, is associated with a rejection of the writer's intentions. One of the problematics related to Hall's reading strategies originates from the inability of viewers to really *know* what producers, directors and writers intend when they are creating media texts/television episodes. This problem was addressed in Chapter 1, but few viewers watching a television show have access to industry professionals in order to determine the preferred/dominant reading position.

One of the shortcomings of audience research has been that much of it focuses on a presumed monolith white audience. The Nielsen ratings, which gauge how television delivers consumers to advertisers, also (perhaps inadvertently) lend credence to the audience studies' inclination to study white audiences. After all, the Nielsens have been

⁸ Stuart Hall. "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis (London: Routledge, 1991), 136-138.

⁹ Ibid, 137.

¹⁰ Ibid, 138.

criticized for relying solely on white (presumably heterosexual) “Nielsen families” for their data, which they deliver to advertisers. As Craig Hoslop suggests, when scholars began studying class and gender with respect to audiences, “sexuality was never really seen as a ‘natural’ consideration of the new audience research agenda.”¹¹ However, while Hoslop (correctly) seeks to disrupt the stranglehold gender and class have on audience research, he fails to recognize the importance of race, particularly when race and other axes of identity converge. It is to this area of research that I now turn.

Blackness, Sexuality and Audience Reception

Very little research has been done on television watching and reception practices of either black or gay audiences. Robin R. Means Coleman’s work is instructive for what this chapter undertakes. Means Coleman conducted what can most classically be defined as a media reception study of black television viewership, meaning making and the black-cast sitcom. In her study, she utilized in-depth interviews with 30 black people regarding their views on representation within the black-cast sitcom historically.¹² Means Coleman’s participants discuss a wide range of black-cast sitcoms, and she ultimately concludes that the “varying interpretations [of her respondents] are testament to

¹¹ Craig Halsop, “Wot No Queers: The Search for Sexual Representation in Audience Research.” *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network*, 2, No. 1 (2009): 2.

¹² Robin R. Means Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy* (New York: Garland Press, 2000), 148.

reception study's acknowledgement of multiple, varied readings that can be assigned to television texts, that is, television programming is open and polysemic.”¹³

While few studies have focused on queer audiences, several scholars are useful for this project. However, while much of the work that has been done is important and instructive, it often does not consider race in conjunction with sexuality. Alexander Doty, a pioneer of queer reception studies, theorizes:

the queerness of mass culture develops in three areas: (1) influences during the production of texts; (2) historically specific cultural readings and uses of texts by self-identified gays, lesbians, bisexuals and queers; and (3) adopting reception positions that can be considered “queer” in some way, regardless of a person's declared sexual and gender alliances.¹⁴

While Doty mostly considers this third area, this chapter engages with the second space. In this chapter, I interview black gay men about explicitly black gay representations to understand the “historically specific cultural readings and uses of texts by self-identified gays.”¹⁵

Additionally, this chapter builds upon Larry Gross's essay, “Out of the Mainstream,” in which he outlines four reading positions of white gay men to media: internalization, subversion, secession and resistance. For Gross, these reading positions (which he calls “responses”) are important because of the ways in which he imagines gay

¹³ Ibid., 144.

¹⁴ Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xi.

¹⁵ Ibid., xi.

men (and sexual minorities generally) are reared within heteropatriarchal culture. Internalization is “the adoption of assimilationist strategies which promise upward (or centerward) mobility, although at the cost of cutting off one’s ‘roots.’”¹⁶ Gross’ suggestion of “roots” here builds upon the notion that one’s roots are within a gay community. However, this notion of a “rootedness” in a gay community may be problematic for some black gay men, who demonstrate an “unrootedness” in both black and gay communities, as some of the scholarship on black gay identity development demonstrates.¹⁷ Second, he argues subversion is a strategy employed, for example, in camp readings. In this way, Gross suggests that gay men subvert what Hall might call the dominant reading by reading texts against the grain. Third, Gross posits a secessionist response whereby a queer reader refuses either to consume mainstream media or to “sample from it with great care and selectivity.”¹⁸ This strategy most closely resembles Hall’s “negotiated reading” strategy.¹⁹ Lastly, resistance is concerned with not only refusing to consume media, but it is rooted in production of media that represents oneself in ways that reflect the self image one wants to project. However, Frederik Dhaenens forwards an alternate method of interpreting resistance when he argues “a text only

¹⁶ Larry Gross, “Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media,” in *Remote Control: Television, Audiences and Cultural Power*, ed. Ellen Seiter (New York: Routledge, 1991), 139.

¹⁷ See Stephen Cox and Cynthia Gallois, “Gay and lesbian identity development: A social identity perspective.” *Journal of Homosexuality*. 30, no. 4(1996), 1-30 for an in-depth discussion of this phenomenon.

¹⁸ Gross, “Out of the Mainstream,” 140.

¹⁹ Hall. “Encoding/Decoding,” 137.

becomes resistant in the act of reading.”²⁰ For Dhaenens, it is not only the refusal to consume media that becomes important, but consuming the media is important in order to reject its ideologies. Taken together, Hall’s, Gross’s and Doty’s work are integral to the work I am doing interpreting the ways in which black gay men make meaning from gay black characters in black-cast sitcoms.

Essex Hemphill briefly engages in what can classically be called an audience study of black gay men and lesbian women that resembles this chapter’s aims. In his essay “*In Living Color: Toms, Coons, Mammies, Faggots and Bucks*,” Hemphill conducted a reception study of black gay men and lesbians in Washington, DC, and Philadelphia, including patrons of the lesbian-owned entertainment complex BJP in West Philadelphia, to determine the ways in which these people made meaning from *In Living Color*’s “Men On...” sketches. Several reading positions emerged among this small sample. For every person who, like Anthony Owens, a 31-year old BJP patron, enjoyed the show and thought that because “it’s a parody... [it] should be taken as such,” there were those who were troubled by “Men On...,” like famed filmmaker Marlon Riggs, because he thought it “justifie[d] all of the very traditional beliefs about black gay sexuality.”²¹ However, others took a more negotiated reading of the text, like Alan Bell, publisher and editor of the now-defunct *BLK* newsmagazine for black lesbians and gay men, who said “Men On...” is “frightfully funny, and I enjoy looking at it, but at the

²⁰ Frederick Dhaenens, “Gay Representation, Queer Resistance, and the Small Screen: A Reception Study of Gay Representations among Flemish Fans of Contemporary Television Fiction,” *Working Papers Film & TV Studies* 1 (2011): 17.

²¹ Essex Hemphill, “In Living Color: Toms, Coons, Mammies, Faggots and Bucks” in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 393, 392.

same time I recognize that these portrayals are going out to people who don't have another context to put them in."²² Hemphill's work illuminates the multiplicity of black gay reading positions by suggesting that there is no monolithic way that black gay men read *In Living Color*'s "Men On..." sketches. I build on Hemphill's study by focusing on more than a single text in my study. In so doing, I will be able to draw linkages between various black-cast sitcoms and representations of black gay men within them.

While responses to media are undoubtedly polysemic, open and negotiated, audience research remains important. This is particularly true because so little work has been done that engages with the meaning-making process black gay men undergo as they view black gay characters. Much of the framework for the discussions I had with these black gay men stemmed from Gross's theorization of gay men's responses to mainstream media representations of gay men and Hall's reading positions as outlined in "Encoding/Decoding." The black gay men in this study discussed their relationships to stereotypes of black gay men in television, humor and the laugh track, narrative development of black gay characters, decoding strategies with relationship to encoding practices, and strategies to better represent black gay men on television.

²² Alan Bell, quoted in *Ibid.*, 394.

Methodology

Individual, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 self-identified black gay men who currently reside in one of two large, Midwestern metropolitan cities: Detroit or Chicago. The participants were recruited by asking key informants to provide initial contact with black gay men to participate in the study. Participation in the project was limited only by two criteria: 1) that the men identify as black and gay, and 2) they have a passing knowledge of the four series under investigation here.

The men range in age from 22 to 53 although the majority of respondents were between 42 and 53 years old. The men in the study have an annual household income that ranges from less than \$10,000 to more than \$100,000 per year although the highest concentration of respondents make more than \$100,000 per year. The men are mostly a college-educated group, with four respondents having completed a bachelor's degree and five men having completed a master's degree. The one respondent whose highest level of education completed is his high school diploma is also the youngest respondent in this study. All but one of the black gay men in this study identify most closely with the Democratic party, while one man identifies himself as Progressive/Independent.

They were asked to watch and take notes on five episodes of black-cast sitcoms with a black gay character: *Moesha*'s "Labels," *Good News*'s "Pilot," *All of Us*'s "Like Father, Like Son, Like Hell" and "My Two Dads," and the *Are We There Yet?* episode

“The Boy Has Style.”²³ These episodes were chosen because, by doing so, I could discern the ways black gay men decoded the episodes examined in Chapters 1 and 2. The black gay men were asked about stereotypes of black gay men in television, humor and the laugh track, and the narrative development of black gay characters. Each respondent was given a link to the episodes, which were housed on a password-protected private account on YouTube. The interviews, which consisted of 36 semi-structured questions, were conducted via telephone, taped and transcribed. While I used a set of interview questions to guide the interview, the direction of the respondent’s answers determined the direction of the interviews. The interviews were divided into three broad categories: 1) background/demographic information, 2) experience with their own coming-out, and 3) black gay characters in black-cast sitcoms. The men in this study have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity. As much as possible, I attempt to present the respondent’s voices without alteration.

It is important to note that I deliberately chose to engage with an audience study of black gay men’s reception practices. I made this decision because I wanted to center black gay men’s reception practices without the inclination to validate their observations by comparing them to another “control” group. As the literature has demonstrated, several studies have been conducted on gay white men, women, and black women, among others. However, no researcher has found value in studying black gay men and their media reception practices – an oversight *Trapped in a Generic Closet* seeks to correct. In the next section, I will begin the analysis of my interviews by first turning to a

²³ Because “My Two Dads” was part two of a two-part episode, I asked the respondents in this study to watch both parts.

discussion of the ways the black gay men in the study understand mass-mediated stereotypes.

Stereotypes, Gay Representation and Black Gay Men

Despite many cultural and media studies assertions (including my own) that stereotypes are a facile way to discuss media images, they fundamentally underpin the ways the black gay men in this study understand images. So-called positive stereotypes ideologically function in a way that is supposed to reflect the preferred image that an identity group's organization wants that group to embody in the public sphere.

This section explores the reported relationship the respondents in this study have to/with stereotypes in media broadly and black-cast sitcoms specifically. What will emerge from the interview excerpts is the difficult ways that black gay men interact with stereotypes, particularly with respect to notions about gay masculinity and femininity.

With respect to stereotypes of gayness, the men in this study expressed a negotiated relationship to and understanding of black gay representation in black-cast sitcoms. Joe, a 22-year-old black gay man who lives in Chicago, initially says that there is an overall feminization of black gay men in media and draws on the HBO series *True Blood* as an exemplar of this trend, although the series is not a black-cast sitcom. As he noted in his interview, "I think [Lafayette] was more of a masculine character and then as

time went on he became more feminized. So there's some feminization happening."²⁴ However, when he thinks about the black-cast sitcoms that were part of this study, he says that he thought *Moesha*, among other shows, was well done. Part of this evaluation of *Moesha* is because there were two gay characters. He said:

I liked that they had both a more masculine and a more feminine character portraying black gay men and in a positive light. They portrayed Omar as very well mannered, a very nice guy who was able to carry a conversation, while Tracy was the more feminine character. He was portrayed as kind of diva-ish, which I guess isn't necessarily positive, but it's not necessarily negative either. Then again the focus wasn't on Tracy.²⁵

While Joe says Tracy's femininity should not necessarily be viewed as negative, he clearly has a preference for Omar because he is "well-mannered," "nice" and "able to carry a conversation," versus being described as "diva-ish." What underpins Joe's analysis is a politics of respectability. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham deploys the term to discuss the activities of black women to achieve equal rights in the early part of the 20th Century by endorsing hegemonic idea(l)s about behavior in an effort to not only uplift but also to reform the black race. She forwards that "reform of individual behavior and attitudes [should be deployed] both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system."²⁶ In other words, through these politics of respectability black

²⁴Joe, Interview by Author. Tape Recording. April 17, 2013, Austin, TX.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church: 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 187.

women were encouraged, as Nina Simone says in her song, *Mississippi Goddamn* to “wash and clean [their] ears and talk real fine just like a lady” as a means to right the wrongs of the Jim Crow era.

Borrowing from this discourse, the Mattachine Society, which was founded in 1950, began publishing the *Mattachine Review* as a way to forward the Society’s mission that “public attitudes toward homosexuals would improve as soon as sex variants began behaving in accordance with the societal norms.”²⁷ While this method was initially deployed as a strategy for gay men and lesbians to be free from discrimination in employment, housing and accommodations, it seems to also underpin the ways Joe and some of the other men in this study make meaning from images of black gay men in black sitcoms.

Gary, a 48-year-old black gay man in Detroit, recognized a trend in black gay characters and the ways television navigates the representational binary. For many of the men in this study, the ways gay black characters navigate this line is bound up in the heterocentrism of the perceived audience for the series/episode. “You have the ones that are primary characters and they are the masculine ones while the secondary characters end up being feminine.”²⁸ Gary found this trend on *All of Us* as well. “Tracy [in *Moesha*] for instance is one I would call a secondary and then the boyfriend of the father [on *All of Us*], was also a secondary character and they both end up being feminine.”²⁹ Joe also thought *All of Us* portrayed the main gay character, Luther as “not so stereotypical. [But]

²⁷ Larry Gross, *Up from Visibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 26.

²⁸ Gary, Interview by Author. Tape Recording. March 28, 2013, Austin, TX.

²⁹ Ibid.

they placed him with a more effeminate male, I think, to try to create this illusion or illustration of the man in the relationship and the female in the relationship.”³⁰ While John Cloud debunks the idea that in “real life” gay couples are constructed along gender binary lines by asserting that “it’s a canard that in most gay couples, one partner plays wife,” that more authentic construction does not, according to Joe, hold true in *All of Us*.³¹ Edward, a 53-year-old black gay man from Detroit, also concurs: “The thing that sort of keeps coming to mind is there were just these kind of stereotypical jokes about gay men [in *All of Us*]. Who’s the man? Who’s the woman? I don’t know. For whatever reason, that story keeps kind of going through my head.”³² In this way, the men in this study understood that by pairing one more feminine gay black character with one that is masculine, the series conformed to a problematic mirroring of heterosexism – with one partner understood as the “woman” while the other was assumed to be the “man.”

However, Gary is not in favor of eliminating these secondary/feminine characters from the televisual landscape because he thinks there should be a broad spectrum of representations. “If we only have more feminine characters, then you run the risk of people thinking of a stereotype. When they are only more masculine, you run the risk of people thinking that the characters are not really gay men. The spectrum should be there to give people a better representation of who gay men can be.”³³ Marcus, a 47-year-old

³⁰ Joe, Interview.

³¹ John Cloud, Are Gay Relationships Different? Time.com, January 17, 2008, accessed March 13, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1704660,00.html>

³² “Edward,” Interview by Author. Tape Recording. March 20, 2013, Austin, TX.

³³ Gary, Interview.

black gay man from Chicago, thinks these more feminine characters serve a very particular narrative purpose, particularly in *All of Us*.

I liked that they provided the shock value of [Luther] not being cut from the stereotypical cloth. Of course, when you're first meeting him, you don't meet the boyfriend, and so I liked they didn't have the father [portrayed as] the stereotypical flamboyant gay character that I saw in *Moesha*. But I think for the purpose of the story and the shock value, [Tracy on *Moesha*] was probably inserted to instantaneously help [the viewer] make that connection.³⁴

In other words, Marcus believes that flamboyant characters in these black-cast sitcoms help viewers identify those who are gay and those who are not, particularly when presented with more masculine gay characters.

While Tim, a 48-year-old black gay man from Detroit, initially purports that nothing is wrong with more flamboyant representations of gay men, he nonetheless believes that television is often disinterested in showing black gay characters who are not flamboyant. "I mean, you know, people like me that are... not flamboyant, just you know, living everyday life, going to an everyday job, having you know, everyday family, et cetera" are missing from the media landscape.³⁵ In this way, while Tim allows that flamboyant gay men are in the world, his desire is to see more representations that hew closer to representations that fit within a broader politics of gay respectability. Peter, a Detroit-based, 49-year-old black gay man, further contends that on *All of Us*, based on

³⁴ Marcus, Interview by Author. Tape Recording. April 1, 2013, Austin, TX.

³⁵ Tim, Interview by Author. Tape Recording. February 27, 2013, Austin, TX.

stereotypes, he thought one of the men in the gay relationship had “a little more lightness to him. If you were going to assign [sex] roles, most likely you would say, ‘Well okay, he’s a bottom.’”³⁶ However, even in the context of Peter’s assessment of one of the men as more closely aligned with femininity and passivity, he says that Luther’s partner “wasn’t really effeminate and snarling, like Tracy [from the *Moesha* episode “Labels”]. But one of the characters mimicked the way he spoke, relying on a stereotype of gay men’s speech.”³⁷

Peter more clearly wrestles with stereotypes in his reactions to *Are We There Yet?* He objects to the ways the script relied on the detection of homosexuality via very specific traits. “I don’t like that whole ‘I can clock people’ aspect of the episode.”³⁸ He found *Are We There Yet?* particularly problematic because the narrative relied on the ability and possibility of being able to detect homosexuality in another person. He believes that gayness has to be detectable via “something more than just the fact that [the black gay character] carried a messenger bag that didn’t look that feminine to me and then, you know, a weirdly colored sweater and then yeah, he’s gay.”³⁹ In fact, he suggests that gaydar, the radar-like assumption that one can detect gayness, has often failed him.

I don’t like that assumption that I got gaydar... I have fallen in love, hit on people that turned out to be straight, so that gaydar does not friggin’ work all the time.

[The black gay character in *Are We There Yet?*] wasn’t played like Richard Lawson’s [more masculine] character in *All of Us*. He wasn’t played like Tracy in

³⁶ Peter, Interview by Author. Tape Recording. January 13, 2013, Austin, TX.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.; “Clock” is a colloquial term that means to detect.

³⁹ Ibid.

Moesha. They just did put him in some loud sweaters but that's all he had and oh, you know, he's gay? You just know he's gay because he has on a sweater that's a little off color. These days there are black men that wear some pretty colorful stuff. So the fact that he had on a sweater and you just made all these assumptions then have your husband sit down and ask him if he's gay? That's crazy and I didn't like it.⁴⁰

In this section, the black gay men begin to grapple with a gay politics of respectability wherein those images of gayness that hew closest to normative masculinity are deemed most acceptable. On one hand, the emergence of these politics underscores the effectiveness of gay rights movements, semiotically connecting gay masculinity and the fight for various rights. On the other hand, as the men in this study begin to acknowledge, feminine black gay men exist in real life and have every right to see themselves represented in black-cast sitcoms as do more masculine characters. The respondents grappled with the ways stereotypes are deployed as a way to detect and decode televisual black gayness. In the next section, they grapple with the possible pitfalls of making black gayness visible on television.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Television's Looking Glass and The Pitfalls of (Tele)Visibility

For some members of marginalized groups, television can help to make their existence feel real. Television can be used as a mirror in which to see one's self reflected (in a nod to Charles Cooley's theory of the looking-glass self).⁴¹ The black gay men in this study are no different. The characters within *Moesha*, *Good News*, *All of Us* and *Are We There Yet?* with which they identify are those who are most like the respondents themselves with respect to sexuality. Marcus related to Omar in *Moesha* because the character is "someone who was hiding [his sexual identity]. And I understood some of the rationale behind his fears of coming out and misrepresenting himself to those that were close to him... He didn't want to let them know he was gay."⁴² In particular, Marcus was drawn to the ways that audiences were able to see a bit of the struggle to come to terms with one's sexuality that Omar embodied. Like Marcus, Gary liked Omar best because he "reflected my experience. When Omar was around Tracy, he was a little uncomfortable. I was the same way around flamboyantly gay people [in real life]."⁴³ Gary suggests that that familiarity with the discomfort around flamboyantly gay characters helped him to feel that Omar was a fully realized character.

Marcus also expressed discomfort with Tracy. "I didn't relate as well to Tracy, the more flamboyant character... But I have obviously seen, and sometimes feel a little

⁴¹ Charles H. Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2006).

⁴² Marcus, Interview.

⁴³ Gary, Interview.

bothered by, the over-the-top stereotypical portrayal of someone who is gay.”⁴⁴ There is an overarching disidentification with more flamboyant characters, like Tracy. Here, I do not mean disidentification in the way José Muñoz has deployed the term to discuss the process wherein encoded messages are scrambled and reconstructed to expose “the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications.”⁴⁵ Rather, I am deploying the term to suggest a failure to identify with effeminate characterizations of black gay men. This disidentification is a rejection of the stereotypical because the men understood it as problematic within a queer politics of respectability – effeminate men and effeminate black gay characters are constructed as “negative” representations. This disidentification with effeminacy does not belong only to black gayness, or gayness in general. As Hall argues, the ultra-masculine performances adopted by some black men “claim visibility for their hardness only at the expense of [...] the feminization of gay black men.”⁴⁶ I argue that the conglomeration of a queer politics of respectability and the hegemonic power of black masculinity converge to create a disidentification and, in some cases, a hatred of the feminine black gay man.

Tim, a 48-year-old black gay Detroit, most closely connected to Luther in *All of Us*. His first reaction when Luther comes out as gay in the *My Two Dads* episode was:

⁴⁴ Marcus, Interview.

⁴⁵ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.

⁴⁶ Stuart Hall, “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture” in *Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. Raiford Guins and Omayra Zaragoza Cruz (London: Sage Publications, 2008), 292.

Finally some people like me. You know gay, average guys... What I also liked about that episode was that gayness was part of the show, but not the whole show, so when I'm thinking of gay, my subconscious kind of takes that and says okay, we're a part of it, but we're not – like being gay, it's not like I've got to take over the whole show. Okay, we're here and we're queer and it's okay and let's just roll with it. It just happens to be, you know.⁴⁷

In a way, Tim is responding to controlling images of black gay men, media images that encourage a semiotic linkage between “the presence of purportedly queer behaviors such as dramatic outbursts, effeminate mannerisms, and outlandish dress... [and] a gay identity, even where the man in question has not made such an identity claim for himself.”⁴⁸ Tim's description of “gay, average guys,” then, is attributed to Luther and his boyfriend not being identifiably gay. In other words, they display few of the physical and behavioral stereotypes that have often been semiologically linked to mass-mediated black gayness. The ways Tim and the other black gay men in this study understands these images are rooted in an awareness that the images can create a sense of anxiety because of the Hollywood image of black gay men that often relies on damaging stereotypes to encode particular ideologies about black gay men.

⁴⁷ Tim, Interview.

⁴⁸ Jasmine Cobb and Robin Means Coleman, “Two Snaps and a Twist: Controlling Images of Black Male Homosexuality on Television.” *African American Research Perspectives*, 13 (2010): 86.

The ghosts of Antoine Meriwether and Blaine Edwards from the Fox Network's *In Living Color* haunt all of these men as the controlling images of black gay characters on television. William, a 38-year-old black gay man from Detroit, conceded that this was the image in his head when, as a youth, he thought about gay men. "[*In Living Color*] really contributed a lot to... what [I thought] black gays were like. I was like middle school or something when that used to come on. And that was how I thought all black gay men were."⁴⁹ He continued, "I was really young, so I didn't think... about myself being gay, because I hadn't done anything [sexually]... But seeing [Antoine Meriwether and Blaine Edwards] I will say, in terms of what I thought gay men were like... that was the image that was in my head."⁵⁰

In addition to a gay politics of respectability, the black gay men in this study implicitly revealed the importance of parasocial relationships to characters on television. Edward Schiappa, Peter B. Gregg and Dean E. Hewes refer to "the phenomenon that viewers form beliefs and attitudes about people they know only through television, regardless of whether such people are fictional characters or real people."⁵¹ Edward felt a degree of unease when he was asked to watch black sitcoms with black gay characters. Part of his discomfort originates from his perception that the historical representation of gay men generally and black gay men specifically has often been problematic and helped heterosexual (and some gay) viewers understand what gayness is and how it is

⁴⁹ William, Interview by Author. Tape Recording. March 21, 2013, Austin, TX.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Edward Schiappa, Peter B. Gregg and Dean E. Hewes, "Can One TV Show Make a Difference?: *Will & Grace* and the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 51, no. 4 (2006).

performed. “Talking about homosexuality within black culture is not always positive. So I felt extremely uncomfortable watching all of the episodes. I thought that the *Moesha* episode [“Labels”] was funny, but I felt myself sort of just on edge wondering where the storyline was going to ultimately go.”⁵²

In addition, some men felt discomfort watching black gay characters because it could reveal their gayness to family members when they did not want to/were not ready to reveal such information. Based on the dominant scripts through which television viewers have been taught to read gayness onto characters’ bodies, some men felt that the very presence of black gayness on television would provide the information for family members to put the puzzle together with respect to their homosexuality.

William recalled watching *Good News* with his mother and “feeling really uncomfortable, even though I hadn’t come out or anything, but there was always something that made me a bit uncomfortable whenever we were in a room and something gay came on television, because I was always thinking, ‘Does she know [that I am gay]?’”⁵³ For William, he wondered if the characteristics that the character in *Good News* portrayed would tip his mother off to his gayness. In other words, he felt gay televisibility had the potential to make his gayness legible for his mother.

Edward picked up on William’s memory of his anxiety associated with watching black gay images. Edward suggested that he has been trained in a way to be weary of black gay representation in media.

⁵² Edward, Interview by Author. Tape Recording. March 20, 2013, Austin, TX.

⁵³ William, Interview.

I stayed sort of on guard through the episodes. To be completely honest, all of those sitcoms made me extremely uncomfortable. I wasn't quite sure where the storyline was headed, and so there was a bit of nervousness as I was watching. I wasn't quite sure whether I was going to end up being upset, kind of pissed off about the messages that were going to be given by these episodes.⁵⁴

While televisual representations of black gay men have not been plentiful, the images that *have* appeared on television have made some black gay men feel skeptical when presented with such images. However, the men in this study ultimately suggested that the representations in *Moesha*, *Good News*, *All of Us*, and *Are We There Yet?* deviated from the representational patterns they have largely grown accustomed to seeing on television, which speaks to their importance within the representational landscape of black gay representation.

Humor, Laugh Tracks and Black Gay Characters in Black Sitcoms

As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, the laugh track works as an ideological tool that underscores who and what is funny. While I brought my own theoretical understanding of humor and the laugh track to that chapter, several of the black gay men in this study also found the laugh track and use of humor problematic in the episodes they watched. John, a

⁵⁴ Edward, Interview.

45-year-old Chicagoan, believes that black gay men, when they appear in media are “designed to make you laugh, so they want to poke fun a little bit about some of the characteristics of gay life and black gay life in particular.”⁵⁵ Peter suggested that the use of laugh tracks for shows that are not funny, particularly within relationship to black gay characters, was problematic. For black sitcoms more broadly, he complained that “they’re not really funny... and they have these horrific laugh tracks.”⁵⁶ He alluded to the ways that the laugh track is supposed to stand in for a broader audience and telegraph what is funny.

It is important to remember that humor, particularly African American humor, serves specific purposes. Mel Watkins argues that broadly speaking, “laughter and the comical ultimately depend on the expectations and assumptions that an individual brings to a situation.”⁵⁷ This becomes important when discussing black gay men within black-cast sitcoms. Forty-six year-old black gay Chicagoan Alex was particularly offended by the audience laughter/laugh track in *Moesha*. He thought the laugh track was meant to ridicule Tracy, the more flamboyantly gay character within the episode. This sense of ridicule was made particularly obvious in the scene wherein Moesha and Omar meet Tracy.

Moesha: You know, I like this whole thing where I talk, you listen and you actually say something back intelligent to me. I mean, what do they call that?

⁵⁵ John, Interview by Author. Tape Recording. May 15, 2013, Austin, TX.

⁵⁶ Peter, Interview.

⁵⁷ Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock*, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 26.

Omar: Conversation.

Moesha: Yeah. Yeah. Well I've never had one of those with a guy I like before.

[Omar puts his head down]

Moesha: Now, if you don't respond we're no longer having a conversation.

[audience laughter]

Tracy: [from off-camera]: Omar? [audience laughter then the camera does a glance object cut from Omar to Tracy]

The first instance of audience laughter is because Moesha has presumably said something funny. However, the second instance of audience laughter, which is bigger than the first, signals that something the in-studio audience has seen before the at-home audience is funny. For Alex, this part of *Moesha* crystallizes the ways that he thinks laughter is used in the episode as a means to ridicule Tracy's gayness, which is constructed as incongruous with expectations of black masculinity. The "audience's response [to Tracy] is what killed the episode for me."⁵⁸ He continued, "I really liked that episode. The only problem I had was with the live audience and the laughing and their reaction."⁵⁹ Similarly, Tim did not like the laugh track in *Moesha* because he felt it was designed to tell "the audience that [gayness] is not at all cool."⁶⁰ Tim believed that the laugh track was designed to mark gayness as something that exists outside of hegemonic

⁵⁸ Alex, Interview by Author. Tape Recording. April 10, 2013, Austin, TX.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Tim, Interview.

constructions of black masculinity. As Herman Gray argues regarding black gayness within television texts, it resonates because “the strategies of representation on which they depend join historical contemporary debates and representations in the black community about homophobia, black gay men, masculinity, sexuality and drag queens.”⁶¹ Because of the ways hegemony functions, we understand what black masculinity can be (and what it cannot be). As such, some black gay maleness can be opened up as a site of humor based in a presumption of derision for that black gay body.

Alex made an important distinction between the laugh track and in-studio laughter, suggesting that he thought *Moesha* used “real” laughter versus a laugh track and that he ultimately found the laughter disrespectful. “It was like you have to wait to see where we’re going with all of this before you turn your nose up at it.”⁶² Alex suggested that the laughter was in some ways premature and that the story was not allowed to develop before the audience laughter instructed the at-home audience on how to decode the episode. More importantly, Alex implicitly critiques the presumed black heterosexual in-studio audience. Whether his understanding of their laughter is real or imagined, the ways he interprets it implies that the imagined black audience is always already anti-gay.

Alex more explicitly stated his distaste with the ways the *Moesha* episode positioned black gayness. Because of the ways that black gayness has most often been mass-mediated, he has come to expect more flamboyant black gay characterizations because TV makers “still have an obligation to make audiences laugh. But, I hated that

⁶¹ Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1995), 142.

⁶² Alex, Interview.

they chose to have the same old stereotypically loud person [Tracy]... I recognize this is still a business... This is a comedy that has to make people laugh, but it's unfortunate that's the way they chose to do it."⁶³

Ultimately, most of the respondents who noticed the laugh track did so for the *Moesha* episode, which Alex said might be related to its position as the oldest sitcom in this study. "By the time *Are We There Yet?* came around, the laugh track wasn't there. Nobody was shocked about it, or as shocked."⁶⁴ However, it is important to note that the *Are We There Yet?* episode used a laugh track that was created entirely in post-production, and the show was not filmed in front of a studio audience.

As I detailed in Chapter 2, the laugh track is an important tool that shapes understanding of television art. As the black gay male respondents in this study demonstrate, when viewing images that are designed to represent one's identity group, the laugh track is difficult to ignore. In the episodes screened for this study, the respondents felt the laugh track was used as a device to make fun of black gayness and position it as a thing that exists outside of hegemonic understandings of blackness generally and black masculinity specifically. Like an audible controlling image, the laugh track holds black gay men up as an abject object of derision and humor.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

“He Was a Plot Device”: Narratively De-Centering Black Gayness

While the episodes of *Moesha*, *Good News*, *All of Us*, and *Are We There Yet?* are all ostensibly episodes about gayness and coming-out, many of the respondents in this study suggested that the inverse is true. They suggest that while gay characters are in the episode’s subplot, as such, the episodes are not *really* concerned with homosexuality as much as they are designed to discuss the ways that gayness circulates (and cannot circulate) within heteronormative spaces and how heterosexual characters respond/react appropriately or inappropriately to the presence of gayness.

In *Moesha*, the scene wherein Omar is recognized as gay is exemplary of the ways some of the gay men in this study suggest that gayness is often decentered in black-cast sitcoms. Peter said, “Here you go, you’ve got this show about homosexuality and you’re dealing face-to-face with it and you presented it as a problem and then you didn’t have any words. You decided to not have words and you pulled the focus off that story with other stuff.”⁶⁵ He continued:

I would have preferred hearing that scene [versus hearing Moesha recite lyrics from Edie Brickell’s song *What I Am*]. If you’re going to educate people and you’re going to show something, let’s show the main thing. You know, it was like the main – well, what I guess they’re saying, the main plot was the fact that Hakeem was mad at Moesha, so Omar’s like a pawn... he was a plot device.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Peter, Interview.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

This reading is counter to the ways episode writer Demetrius Bady imagined the episode, which was rooted in attempting to make Omar's sexuality his own, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Marcus thought that *Good News* decentered the gay storyline by focusing “on the whole religious issues with being gay, being black and in the church. But, I did feel it focused a little bit too much on the new minister and trying to work his way in with the congregation... And knowing what the program was supposed to be about, I think I would have liked to have seen more of the focus on the issues related to gayness within the black church.”⁶⁷ Marcus suggested that *Good News* deployed gayness as a plot device to demonstrate “truths” about the series’ core cast: that they were an open and accepting cast, even as the black gay character and his boyfriend never return to the series. The “Pilot” episode’s quick acceptance of homosexuality and resolution ultimately discards homosexuality as an “issue.” Marcus continued, “the almost immediate acceptance in the heat of the moment with the mother saying, ‘I knew you were. Is that all?’” served to resolve homosexuality far too quickly for Marcus’ tastes.⁶⁸ Peter adds, “These really important issues, that could be examined in a more interesting way, are just sort of just glossed over in *Good News*. It almost felt like the show was incomplete... here’s another moment when you’ve got singing and all this stuff going on and you totally lost sight of the young guy because he wasn’t an active participant in that scene and he should have been.”⁶⁹ In this way, the respondents forward that the episode ultimately treats gayness as

⁶⁷ Marcus, Interview.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Peter, Interview.

a thing rather than as a way of being. Put another way, gayness is a topic that the series broaches as something that interrupts the series' heteronormativity rather than an opportunity to explore the ways gayness exists in the real world. In this way, as I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter and as I discussed in Chapter 1, the episodes see gayness as wholly confined to the coming-out or revelation process.

Edward said that the main narrative of the *All of Us* episodes did not seem to concern gayness. "There's no conversation about being gay in general, but we're more focused on the [heterosexual] character and how [his biological father's gayness] impacted him."⁷⁰ William concurs, adding "the episodes seemed more concerned with this dysfunctional family trying to get along together, and the father's sexuality didn't really have much to do with that."⁷¹ While Edward and William suggested that the decentering of gayness was problematic, it was one of the things Peter liked about the episode. Unlike his revulsion regarding the way that both *Moesha* and *Good News* decentered the gay storyline, in *All of Us*, he "liked the fact that they didn't set [the father] to the wayside and yet, I also liked the fact that the gayness wasn't the story. The story and all of the plots were... they intersected."⁷² However, he stopped himself because he acknowledged the ways he expected gayness to unfold changed from *Moesha* and *Good News* to his discussion of *All of Us*. "One minute I'm saying, well you know, I don't you know. I like the fact that it wasn't all that there was. Then the other minute, I'm

⁷⁰ Edward, Interview.

⁷¹ William, Interview.

⁷² Peter, Interview.

complaining because they didn't show the climax. But somehow for me, those situations were a little different."⁷³

Are We There Yet? followed the trend wherein gayness was decentered, but within "The Boy Has Style," stereotypes related to gayness were centered. In other words, many of the men suggested that the episode was not about gayness as much as it was about the ways that heterosexual characters could detect gayness via stereotypes.

Peter said:

The gay character had on a sweater and the mother made all these assumptions. And then she made enough assumptions that the husband's going to sit down and just ask the gay characters and it's going to turn out to be true. I did not like that there was no twist; it was not part of another plot. It was just based on somebody's silly assumption that played out and it was just like [the script] confirmed every stereotype about [gay] people.⁷⁴

Joe concurs, saying, "I thought they didn't really attack any gay issues... I mean I guess they tried to convey that some gay boys or queer identified males have to go through when females are attracted to them, but otherwise, the episode didn't really focus on gayness per se."⁷⁵

Are We There Yet? was the series that resulted in the most split readings between the men in this study. Tim felt gayness was decentered and stated that the episode "really

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Joe, Interview.

put the focus on what was important here. Not that this man is gay, but the fact that he could [emotionally] hurt your daughter.”⁷⁶ Gary supported Tim’s reading, saying, “That was refreshing. It was hopeful because it made me feel hopeful that there are a lot of straight black men who are just saying ‘Being gay is not the issue.’ It’s just what comes in this situation how it can impact this other person and you need to really think about revealing that in order to not lead this person on. I actually like this episode for that reason.”⁷⁷ For Tim and Gary, the ways that gayness was decentered normalized gayness within the context of the episode. They are not suggesting that normal means “embracing one identity or one set of tastes as though they were universally shared, or should be.”⁷⁸ Rather, they suggest that gayness is not made an issue within the context of the episode. However, John disagreed with Tim and Gary. He argued, “The gay person in that show was very flat... He just kind of was there, and it was more about whether or not the family could accept knowing that he was gay.”⁷⁹

This section has suggested that the respondents in this study are examining series beyond the level of the image. In other words, while they are paying close attention to the ways stereotypes are deployed across the series, they are also paying attention to the narrative functions of black gay characters within the episode’s narrative. They also implicitly understand the ways that the episodes do not necessarily consider black gay viewers within the realm of audience segments. Therefore, the decentering of black

⁷⁶ Tim, Interview.

⁷⁷ Gary, Interview.

⁷⁸ Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1.

⁷⁹ John, Interview.

gayness is expected within the series. In the next several sections, I deploy Hall's Encoding/Decoding analysis to place respondents' observations in comparison with the ways the episode writers believe they have written the episodes.

Men On... Sitcoms: Black Gay Men Reading Black Gay Characters

While to this point this chapter has laid out observations about the ways this group of black gay men understand gayness within four episodes of black sitcoms that included black gay characters specifically, I have not put their observations in conversation with the findings from the interviews with the writers of the episodes detailed in Chapter 1. This section engages with the ways these men specifically decode the episodes compared with the ways the writers wrote them. Specifically drawing on the literature on reading strategies I laid out in the beginning of this chapter, this section draws linkages to the instances where black gay male viewers are employing negotiated, preferred and oppositional readings.

Negotiated Readings

The most common response to meaning making is to engage in a negotiated response to media texts. In this sense, the black gay men in this study understood that there were some problematic elements of the episodes they watched; however, they also found redeeming qualities. John expressed a negotiated relationship with *Moesha's* "Labels" episode. He liked the episode, but he believed that Tracy, the gay character

added by the series showrunner, was unfriendly and was shown to be misogynistic and anti-woman. In this way, he felt some of the authorial contestation and issues Bady had with the showrunner's input on the "Labels" script. John continued, "I don't think [Tracey] had to be unfriendly to be flamboyant. I don't mind sassiness, but I think they made him look unfriendly, and gay flamboyant [men are] bad because they don't like women; they don't even want to be around them. I don't think that was a good portrayal; they [can] have close relationships with black women and it should be a balance."⁸⁰ However, he disagreed with Bady's suggestion that coming-out was unimportant. He said:

The coming-out, or lack thereof, makes me question who [Bady] was catering to, who his audience was supposed to be? Was the purpose of having that episode to show how black gay men can come out and be accepted? Was it to show that black gay men shouldn't come out because they're not going to be accepted? It wasn't clear to me. I definitely agree that black gay men should not *have* to come out, but I think it could have been rewritten so that would have come across in a different way.⁸¹

Part of John's unfavorable attitude toward Tracy is rooted in his effeminacy. Gross argues, "sexual minorities are among the most susceptible to internalizing the dominant culture's values because the process of labeling generally occurs in isolation."⁸² John also implicitly found that the coming-out scene in *Moesha* demonstrated that the series is not

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Gross, "Out of the Mainstream," 139.

for gay people. In other words, he believes that the episode is concerned with explaining and exploring black gayness for an audience that is heterosexual.

Good News also elicited a negotiated reading from Marcus who said, “While I understood the point they were trying to make relative to church and tolerance and acceptance, in looking at my own life and being a part of the church it didn’t connect for me with the immediate acceptance by the parents and then with his church and then the interracial aspect. It all just quickly flowing together and being accepted without any real issue being resolved, it just naturally sort of occurred.”⁸³ As is expected in audience studies, Marcus brings his autobiography to bear on *Good News*. He clearly understands the way the episode is supposed to be read; however, he argues that the episode feels rushed and unnatural. Episode writer Ed Weinberger suggested that he had (and continues to have) a deep understanding of and connection to black churches and their stereotypical views on homosexuality and that, as such, the episode originates from an “authentic” space. In addition to attending a black church in Los Angeles, he suggested that the episode was based on “what I know about the black church’s point of view regarding gay members or just the gay community.”⁸⁴ However, although the episode came from what Weinberger felt was an authentic space, Marcus remained unconvinced of its ultimate narrative effectiveness.

While Antonia March and Jacqueline McKinley were attempting to open up the ways that black gayness could be mass-mediated in the black sitcom in their *All of Us* episode, William did not believe they achieved their goal. For him, “The episode seemed

⁸³ Marcus, Interview.

⁸⁴ Ed Weinberger, Interview by Author. Tape Recording. March 19, 2013, Austin, TX.

like it was written by a heterosexual person who didn't know what the hell they were writing, and they just were writing stupid, corny dialogue to try to give this episode some type of gay edge, or maybe capitalize on this sudden influx of [gay characters] in those types of situation comedies.”⁸⁵ William seems to draw on a discourse of the “gay 1990s” that featured a plethora of gay (mostly white) on-going representation in *Ellen* (ABC, 1994-1998), *Spin City* (NBC, 1996-2006), and *Will & Grace* (NBC, 1998-2006), and episodic representations on *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988-1997), *The Golden Girls* (NBC, 1985-1992), and *Dear John* (NBC, 1988-1992), among others. However, William still negotiated his reading of the *All of Us* episode. “I guess it was cool that he didn't hate his father for being gay. But the whole relationship with him and [his adoptive] father? That still could have happened had the gay father storyline not come into the episode. The gay character felt like bad comic relief.”⁸⁶

With respect to McKinley and March's *Are We There Yet?* episode, Marcus appreciated that the gay character was a football player and that this plot device may have been attempting to change dominant stereotypes of gayness. He liked the idea of having a gay football player on television. He said, “I kind of liked that dichotomy, the fact that they were maybe sort of breaking that stereotype and that mindset that there can be sports figures who can be gay and can be comfortable with wearing colorful outfits or manbag or what have you.”⁸⁷ William negotiated his reading of the episode in a different manner. While he found pleasure in McKinley and March's refusal to make the character

⁸⁵ William, Interview.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Marcus, Interview.

stereotypically gay, he did not think that “the mother picking out that he was gay was not all that believable, because he really didn’t do anything at all to give it away... I’m like really? Like her gaydar is that good?”⁸⁸

While the black gay male respondents in this study could be understood as engaging in negotiated responses to the episodes, they also read the episodes in ways that complemented the spirit with which the writers wrote them. This is the focus of the next section on the respondents’ preferred readings of the episodes.

Preferred Reading

For the purposes of this project, a preferred reading was determined in relation to Hall’s suggestion that media messages “have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them, and have themselves become institutionalized.”⁸⁹ Because I have detailed the institutional and ideological contours of each episode in Chapter 1, this section will discuss audience responses that coincided with the stated ways of decoding set forth by episode writers.

Tim said, “I thought the *Good News* ‘Pilot’ was a good episode. I thought, you know, it gave a positive vibration. For the parent to say, there’s nothing wrong with being gay. That it’s not the end of the world? There are bigger fish to fry, you know, than, oh you have a person of another race at your dinner table... I mean it dealt with the angst

⁸⁸ William, Interview.

⁸⁹ Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” 55.

and anxiety of being gay and the subject matter they covered was done well.”⁹⁰ Edward further illustrated a preferred reading of the episode. He said:

Having this conversation about being gay in the black church was very refreshing because that’s something that you don’t often see. Having this immediate acceptance or understanding about the character’s sexual orientation was a bit of a surprise. So I kept thinking, okay, so that’s not a problem. So what is the problem? And having race be the thing that kind of set the mother off was just a bit surprising and unexpected; and so I thought this is not just your sort of typical story about being gay and coming to terms with it. It has this other element to it that is sort of refreshing and I could personally relate to it.⁹¹

In this way, Tim and Edward demonstrate a reading of the episode that mirrors writer Weinberger’s who suggests that he wanted homosexuality to be positioned as inconsequential and wanted the mother’s problem to be rooted in the fact that her son was involved in a cross-racial relationship. Weinberger says, “Her outrage... That’s a comic position, but a true one. Why *can’t* you go out and find a gay black man?”⁹²

The episode writing on *All of Us* particularly resonated with John. He thought the way the father’s interaction with the gay character was written was exceptional. “I think [the father] did some of the right things, but I think that, because he was struggling with

⁹⁰ Tim, Interview.

⁹¹ Edward, Interview.

⁹² Weinberger, Interview.

[his homosexuality] himself, it was very hard for him to be in his son's life when he was a young gay man. He may have been in his son's life, but he wasn't out in his son's life.”⁹³

As this section suggests, while there are instances when a viewer fully engages in a preferred reading, these instances are far less frequent than when the black gay respondents in this study adopted a negotiated reading position. Interestingly, none of the respondents expressed a preferred reading of *Moesha*. They either read that show, which a black gay man wrote, in ways that were negotiated or, as will be discussed in the next section, in oppositional ways.

Oppositional readings

Similar to preferred readings, there were few instances wherein the black gay men in this study demonstrated an oppositional reading. This strategy entails reading an episode or a scene in ways that are completely counter to the way it has been written and/or imagined by producers. As Gross details, “even when a characterization is intended to be sympathetic... gay members of the audience may wince at the falsity of the image, and find themselves laughing at different times from the straight audience.”⁹⁴ The false image to which Gross gestures can be observed in Tim’s reading of *Moesha*. “I mean [the episode] started out kind of okay, but then – I don’t know. It just left a bad taste in my mouth the way that Moesha acted towards [Tracy]. When the flamboyant guy

⁹³ John, Interview.

⁹⁴ Gross, “Out of the Mainstream,” 142.

walks in and Moesha's so taken aback... I just did not like that episode."⁹⁵ Tim and Peter found the revelation problematic in "Labels." Tim found that the scene "just lets you kind of down."⁹⁶ In addition, Peter "thought that was wasted. Dramatically, it was wasted. If they wanted to really do something interesting and be educational or whatever, that was the moment to really do it and have it be authentic."⁹⁷ That scene was particularly troubling for Peter because he thought it made Moesha and Hakeem the heroes because the last dialogue in the episode is Moesha saying, "Dear Diary, I got my friend back."

Surprisingly, Bady wrote the only episode that the black gay men in this study read in oppositional ways. On one hand, respondents' oppositional readings appear to have been prompted by the addition of Tracy by the showrunner, Ralph Farquhar. However, as Tim and Peter suggested, the end of the episode was a "letdown" in that it did not provide satisfying narrative closure that considers gayness. This is particularly surprising given that Bady fought for the ambiguity/refusal of a coming-out speech act.

Ultimately, this section suggests that it is far more likely for black gay men to engage in a negotiated reading of black gay television representations. While that is not "news," it illuminates the ways the black gay men in this study negotiate their relationship to television images of black gay men and where they find questionable with the dominant narratives within which black gay male characters are written. The next section uncovers how these respondents would fashion television representations in such

⁹⁵ Tim Interview.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Peter Interview.

a way that would allow them to more clearly read black gay representation in the preferred ways.

It's Broke... Fix It: Black Gay Men and the Future of Black Gay Representation

As the interviews with the study respondents have demonstrated, television's representation of black gay men for black gay men is problematic. However, each of the study participants offered a prescription for the ways that black gay representation can/should be changed to make it feel more representative, inclusive and fair to them. However, their prescriptions for the ways to "fix" black gay televisual representation is often fraught with contradictions, inadvertently underscoring the difficulty associated with getting representation "right." In order to create a black gay character that would meet John's expectations, he suggested that the character should

...have gay friends, live a gay lifestyle, but still have a circle of friends some that know and some that don't know because they don't need to. But I also think that if they really wanted to expound on relationships where you have to actually tell a person that you're gay, just make sure that it's the right relationship and it's a relationship that you think that you want to maintain or move to another level, and that's why you're telling them.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ John Interview.

Ultimately, John argued that a black gay character should be as fully developed as any other character a writer might write. He also wants coming out to have narrative utility. Coming out should not simply be about the act of disclosure; rather it should have a bearing on the person's need to know and the maintenance of the relationship. John observed that in the episodes he watched for this study, the fact of gayness had no bearing on the outcomes of the narrative universes of *Moesha*, *Good News*, *All of Us*, and *Are We There Yet?* Despite the notion that Omar was the cousin of a major character on *Moesha*, that Eldridge was the son of a main character on *Good News*, that Luther is Robert's biological father, and that Lindsey and Cedric agree to remain friends, all of these coming-out stories have more to do with demonstrating the growth of main characters before discarding the black gay characters for other narrative ground.

Like March and McKinley, Dave, a 42-year-old Detroiter, believes the key to better black gay representation is more representations within the same series. He said, "If you get to have only one black gay character in your sitcom, I suspect there are more of us out there who don't fit that stereotype than do."⁹⁹ Gary added that he would like to see a broader spectrum of black gay characters within a single series. "You have the so-called 'hood rat' out there and then you have people who claim to be the intelligentsia and they're smarter than everybody and they're better than everybody and they set themselves apart. So you have the entire spectrum of society in gay people and I'd like to see that on a TV show."¹⁰⁰ Through presenting more black gay characters (quantitatively speaking) within the same series, there is a greater likelihood that those viewers of the

⁹⁹ Dave, Interview by Author. Tape Recording. March 13, 2013, Austin, TX.

¹⁰⁰ Gary, Interview.

show would receive a broader view of black gayness. In other words, as the respondents in this study have suggested, nothing is explicitly problematic with effeminate black gay characters as much as there are issues with respect to that characterization being presented as the only way that gayness is mass-mediated. In addition, by including black gay characters more frequently, there is an opportunity to imagine “gay stories” as existing outside of coming-out narratives.

As I detailed in Chapter 1, Weinberger said he was unable to imagine other stories for his black gay character on *Good News*. However, William says writers and producers of black-cast sitcoms “need to represent gays in a broader sense [that moves beyond stereotypes].”¹⁰¹ He pointed to MTV’s *Teen Wolf* (2011 -) as a series that broadly mirrors the way that he’d like to see black gay men represented. “The show’s very, very diverse... There are gay couples and things like that and they reoccur on the show. [Writers on] black sitcoms should watch how they integrate that into just the daily lives of these characters... [The episodes] still have humor, and it seems seamless to me.”¹⁰²

For William, black-cast sitcoms need to take the emphasis off coming-out narratives. Using *Teen Wolf* as an exemplar, William said the series does not feature “plot twists that focus on [the main character] being gay... You just have this person who fits seamlessly in this world. They aren’t making his gayness a big deal... But then too, it’s a white show.” William observed an industrial difference between white- and black-cast sitcoms that is partially rooted in ideas about televisual gayness. With respect to televisual gayness, he implicitly suggested that white gayness is more easily situated

¹⁰¹ William, Interview.

¹⁰² Ibid.

within white televisual worlds than black ones. I argue that part of this exclusion of black gayness from black televisual worlds is also rooted in a reluctance to include black gayness as a normative part of blackness. In other words, because the television industry understands black gayness as always already outside of hegemonic blackness, it can be excluded from “authentic” black televisual worlds.

Alex would like to see stories move beyond coming-out narratives in black-cast sitcoms. He imagined that possibility with *Moesha*. “Maybe we could have seen more Omar and shown Moesha getting to like him so it wasn’t a big deal that he was gay. Why just stop at that particular point? It could have gone further.”¹⁰³ He suggested that we only knew that Omar was gay rather than any other pertinent details. “Maybe Omar’s a brain surgeon or something, and Moesha says, ‘Wow I thought all you cared about was fashion.’”¹⁰⁴ Peter added, “I think that I would actually like to see gay characters like on *Downton Abbey* where they actually have characters and you know them and then all of a sudden, you say, oh, they’re gay, and you didn’t know at the beginning. I find that really fascinating. I want to see regular black gay characters and make them part of the storyline. When I was watching these shows [in the study] I thought, ‘I would try to have an actually funny show with black gay characters as part of the storyline.’ Not just in one episode and then put away.”¹⁰⁵ Both Alex and Peter suggest a post-gay approach to gay representation would be useful. They want television sitcoms where black gayness is a minor part of the storyline. In other words, there is no need for an “official” coming-out

¹⁰³ Alex, Interview.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Peter, Interview.

episode; rather viewers learn that the character is gay via exposition. Once the black gay character is established, his gayness would be revealed through romantic relationships, and it would just be a component of the character.

Marcus ceded comedy to heteronormativity and focused on drama as the space(s) for more nuanced and developed black gay characters:

My concern is with comedy, while you can still get some points across and you have the messages embedded between the laughter, I think you just get more engrossed and more involved, and it feels more believable, and it's more memorable when it's embedded in a serious format, or a drama, a genre that is taken seriously. It's receiving recognition or Emmys, and it's well written, and it's well acted, and you've got respected actors and actresses who are being a part of the series and the drama and dealing with real issues and problems and drawing attention to abuse or intolerance or hatred, or whatever. Whereas a comedy's shorter period of time doesn't allow you to get as engrossed in the storylines, because it's typically going to have the happy ending, and because it's designed to make you laugh.¹⁰⁶

Marcus's critique of black gay representation hinges not only on genre but a notion of quality. His assumption is that drama can do things that the sitcom cannot in terms of storytelling, which involves storyline developments that are assumed to be more complex. He implicitly argued that in order to tell black gay stories, it is necessary to tell it in a complex manner. Second, Marcus is drawing from/on "quality TV" discourses to

¹⁰⁶ Marcus, Interview.

explain the ways that drama can be better at developing/representing black gay male characters. For example, black-cast dramas, including *The Haves and the Have Nots* (OWN, 2013 -) and *Empire* (FOX, 2015 -), currently include co-starring black gay characters whose gayness ultimately becomes secondary to their character's development. However, as Sarah Cardwell argues, "We are able to conclude that something is of high quality based not on our own experience or critical judgment of it, but on our recognition of particular aesthetic features it contains."¹⁰⁷ In this way, Marcus relies on arbitrary markers related to acting, writing and industry recognition to define "quality" television. Ultimately, he argues that comedy generally and the black-cast sitcom specifically is always already unable to articulate a complex portrait of black gayness, even as it does a more thorough job with black heterosexual characters.

The black gay men in this study have articulated two broad ways they hope televisual black gayness will develop within the black-cast sitcom. First, writers and producers should reject the gay tokenism that has become a pervasive representational strategy whereby a single black gay character is called on to represent all of the black gayness within a series/episode. From an audience studies perspective, these single characters carry the burden of representation whereby they must embody all that viewers know about black gayness. As the men in this study have illuminated, when there is a single black gay character, it is nearly impossible for the character to be all things to all people. Second, addressing the burden of representation that single black gay characters

¹⁰⁷ Sarah Cardwell, "Is Quality Television Any Good?: Generic Distinctions, Evaluations and the Troubling Matter of Critical Judgment" in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London: L. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2011), 20-21.

are called upon to carry, the men in this study argue that more representations are needed in order to allow the spectrum of black gayness to be mass-mediated. Several of the men in this study cited the Logo series *Noah's Arc* (Logo, 2005 – 2006) as a model that adequately demonstrated a fuller spectrum of black gayness on television. The half-hour dramedy followed the lives and loves of four black gay men in Los Angeles. The series featured characters who spoke to the myriad ways that black gayness can exist, from hegemonically masculine characters to the effete. The men in this study suggest that if there are multiple black gay characters, it becomes more difficult to find the use of stereotypes problematic because more than one black gay character is being called on to carry the burden of representation.

Conclusions

While the idea that black gay men negotiate meaning when it comes to self-representation is fairly obvious, one of the important findings of this study is the degree to which black gay men seek post-gay representation. They are interested in achieving a representational epoch when gayness is not presented as an “issue of the week” that is narratively discarded. Rather, their hope is to see more representations that feature gayness as a component of the character’s otherwise intersectional identity. In this way, the men demonstrated a keen awareness that these characters largely seemed to only be positioned as “gay” rather than any other axis of identity. In addition, while their gayness was centered, the men understood their storylines as being decentered from the narrative

universe of the series, making the episodes not about those characters per se but about the heterosexual cast's reaction to them.

Additionally, this study lends credence to the notion that viewers are not only active but are aware of the inner workings of a TV show outside of the level of the text. The men in this study understood the use of the laugh track and humor as a means to help produce knowledge for viewers. In many ways, particularly with *Moesha* and *All of Us*, they read the laugh track and the humor within the episodes as working against the ways they thought they were supposed to decode the episodes.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, while stereotypes remain a contested terrain, and defining such stereotypes as “positive” or “negative” remains problematic, for the men in this study, that language proved a cogent way for them to engage with the images, even as they wrestled with how the binary is defined, contested and ideologically reified. However, the men in this study seem to be less concerned with stereotypes per se, as they understand that these are based on diverse types of people who exist in the world. Rather, they are more concerned with the singularity of black gay representation that works from within a system of tokenism. When/if more than one black gay character is represented in a show, they find the series mostly positive because it demonstrates that there are multiple ways in which to be black and gay. In this way, episodes like *Moesha*'s “Labels” and *All of Us*'s “My Two Dads” were given greater reception leeway because there were two black gay characters that could carry the burden of representation together.

Ultimately, the black gay men in this study suggest the multiplicity of meaning-making strategies from televisual images. These men cannot be understood as representing a monolithic response to images of black men in black-cast sitcoms. Rather, these men bring their whole, intersectional selves to their readings of media. For the first time, this study asserts that black gay men are an important audience segment to study because they allow an opportunity to articulate their understanding of images that are supposed to be representative of their lives and experiences.

Conclusion: Trapped in Black-Cast Sitcoms

As I was drafting this chapter, *Entertainment Weekly* reported that actress Raven-Symone is slated to appear in a guest-starring role on the ABC series *black-ish* as one of the lead character's lesbian sister.¹ While Symone's character is not a black gay man, she *is* a black lesbian, and *black-ish* is not a three-camera, laugh-track, black-cast sitcom like the black-cast sitcoms I have discussed in this project. The series demonstrates the lasting functionality of the "generic closet" on the black-cast sitcom post-2010 (the year in which *Are We There Yet?* aired on TBS). *black-ish* demonstrates the ways that the black-cast sitcom's "generic closet" closet functions: it brings black gay characters out of the representational closet for an episode (or a few episodes) before returning its "deviant" sexuality to the closet where no one will (or has to) speak about homosexuality again. This is the trap.

As the series in this dissertation demonstrated, the trap is that black gay characters perform solely within particular narratives/narrative functions in the black-cast sitcom. They are called upon to come-out, which, as respondents in illuminated in Chapter 3, works to decenter black gayness. As television writers discussed in Chapter 1, black gay storylines are only imagined and written within a very narrow script – a script that is first, and foremost, concerned with maintaining the narrative stasis and heteronormativity of

¹ Natalie Abrams, "Raven-Symone to Play Dre's Gay Sister on *black-ish*," EW.com, February 25, 2015, accessed March 1, 2015, <http://www.ew.com/article/2015/02/25/raven-symone-play-dres-gay-sister-black-ish>.

the series. By decentering gayness, the writers wrote and the respondents noticed, that the act of coming-out is positioned as a cause-effect chain rooted in a heterocentric reaction to homosexuality. These characters' gayness ceases to be about them but rather about the information they provide and the ways it affects the rest of the heterosexual cast. In other words, *Moesha* asks "Is Omar gay?" while *Good News* asks, "How will Eldridge's mother react to his homosexuality?" *All of Us* ponders whether or not Robert will accept his birth father's gayness and *Are We There Yet?*, like *Moesha*, wonders, "Is Cedric gay?" These questions have little to do with Omar, Eldridge, Luther or Cedric. Building upon Foucault, these black gay characters within the black-cast sitcom are written, and read, as being objects of information but never the subject of information.² Viewers discover that these black characters are gay, and that gayness becomes the only information revealed about them. That small piece of information (and often the speculation about such information) sets off a narrative chain of events that often occurs when these black gay characters are not on screen. In other words, they are talked about, but they are not often allowed to engage in those conversations.

When these characters are not performing the coming-out function, they are often held up as abject "Others" to be ridiculed and, in the process, reify black masculinity. These characters demonstrate what happens when one transgresses the (artificial) line between homosexuality and heterosexuality. The use of the laugh track and humor, as I argued in Chapter 2, help to position black gay characters as not only permissible as a site for jokes but to also clearly position black gayness as outside of and unwelcome within

² Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan, (NY: Vintage Books 1995), 200.

the heterocentric televisual norm broadly and black masculinity specifically. The instructive possibilities of the laugh track are particularly important for two reasons. First, the black gay men in this study noticed the laugh track, which underscores the ways that they read the whole text, not “just” the narrative. Second, as the black-cast sitcom largely retains its use of the laugh track (often wholly created in post-production on series that do not film in front of a live, studio audience), it can help to structure meaning(s) for viewers. As some of the respondents underscored in Chapter 3, the laugh track was deemed “disrespectful” with respect to gayness. In this way, respondents demonstrate the ideological power that the laugh track wields. It grants permission to laugh at (or with) certain characters, suggesting that viewers need that kind of instruction.

Trapped in a Generic Closet is concerned with the cultural production, circulation and consumption of black gay images in black-cast sitcoms and what happens when an identity group is rendered visible. While there are certainly similarities with the ways that white-cast sitcoms deploy black gay characters, white-cast series, such as *Spin City*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, *Don't Trust the B**** in Apartment 23*, and *Sirens*, have historically engaged much more deeply with black gay characters given their status as co-stars or series regulars. However, black gayness in black-cast sitcoms is treated differently from the ways black gayness is approached in these white-cast sitcoms. The problem, as gestured toward in Chapter 3, is twofold. First, black gay characters' storylines are virtually unimaginable within the black sitcom's (hetero)normative world – at least as the writers in this study revealed and the industrial absence of such characters bears out. And when those stories *can* be imagined, those who have the power to

greenlight stories (most often the series showrunner) reject the stories as viable narrative options. Second, the industrial reasoning originates from with an institutional and mass-mediated set of assumptions about blackness that ultimately feed industrial understanding of black audiences. This logic aggressively connects black communities, religion and anti-gay sentiments into a toxic mix that monolithically stands in for a cultural understanding of blackness from those outside of such communities. This is particularly problematic because industrial decision-makers are overwhelmingly white.

As the authors of the 2014 Hollywood Diversity Report, a report from UCLA researchers that quantitatively explores the relationship between diversity and finances within the culture industries, underscores, “historically, there has been a dearth of gender, racial and ethnic diversity in film and television – both in front of and behind the camera.”³ This lack of diversity suggests (other than a real problem with the ways Hollywood employment works), that black viewers are being imagined in a way that may or may not be out of step with how they exist in fact. These viewers are likely something wholly different than the cardboard cutouts industry executives imagine. Because few people of color are among the ranks of those making programming decisions (particularly because so few networks are producing what *might* be understood as black-cast sitcoms), ideas about blackness and its alleged anti-gay ideology can proliferate unchecked. As Larry Gross suggests, “when groups or perspectives attain visibility, the manner of that representation will itself reflect the biases and interests of those elites who define the

³ Darnell Hunt, Ana-Christina Ramon, and Zachary Price, “2014 Hollywood Diversity Report: Making Sense of the Discontent,” *Ralph Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA*, (Los Angeles, 2014), 5.

public agenda. And these elites are (mostly) white, (mostly) middle-age, (mostly) male, middle and upper-middle class, and entirely heterosexual (at least in public).”⁴ There seems to be no change in this ideology in sight.

The Post-Gay Representation Trap

Importantly, black gay representation, from a black-cast sitcom production and reception perspective, is bound up in post-gay rhetoric. This post-gay rhetoric is a reflection of a politics of normal that seeks to flatten out gayness. As Michael Warner argues, this rejection of the feminine gay man is rooted in a “hierarchy of respectability” that works as the *raison d’être* for a gay and lesbian politics of representation.⁵ Closely linked to black politics of respectability (as discussed in Chapter 3), images of gay men generally, and black gay men specifically, are bound up in the power of the image on television screens to change anti-gay people’s hearts and minds. In some ways, post-gay rhetoric owes much of its currency to the work of GLAAD and other gay rights advocacy organizations that fought (and continue to fight) against “negative” stereotypes in media. However, this rhetoric has been picked up and re-circulated by gay men and lesbians themselves. In October 2013, on an episode of *Oprah’s Next Chapter* that focused on

⁴ Larry Gross, “Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media,” in *Remote Control: Television, Audiences and Cultural Power*, ed. Ellen Seiter (New York: Routledge, 1991), 131.

⁵ Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 49.

“Gay Hollywood,” Winfrey hosted producer/actor Dan Bucatinsky, Jesse Tyler Ferguson from *Modern Family* and Wanda Sykes. In the episode, Bucatinsky suggests that what he most enjoys about Shonda Rhimes is that she writes gay characters who “just happen to be” gay. However, in suggesting that these gay characters “just happen to be...” he ignores the cultural specificity of gayness in favor of flattening out differences because in his worldview, difference seems to be a dirty word. In the process of “flattening out” gayness in order to make it palatable for both heterosexual and “respectable” gay viewers, gayness fails to maintain its cultural specificity.

From both a audience reception and production perspective, as demonstrated in Chapters 1 and 3 of *Trapped in a Generic Closet*, this drive to reconfigure the meanings attached to black gayness is problematized because it is ensnared in a post-gay rhetoric that narrowly defines the parameters within which “positive representations” can exist becoming a new form of hegemony. Under this logic, there can only be a certain number of ways to be a gay character on television and that includes being “normal” – or put another way, these characters have to be masculine, either happily single (and celebrate) or partnered/married and having (or thinking about having) children. As the black gay male respondents in *Trapped in a Generic Closet* eschew feminine black gay characters appearing in black-cast sitcoms as the sole black gay character, they have no similar prohibition on “masculine” black gay characters existing on their own within black-cast sitcom narrative universes. This suggests that they do not want people who have little contact with black gay men to think all black gay men are “feminine.” In this way, the respondents in Chapter 3 suggest an understanding of parasocial relationships, which

suggests that television viewers develop attitudes about people from television, as they do in “real life” and may “develop an affinity (or revulsion) with the persona they watch on television.”⁶ However, it is permissible for this same group of people to believe all black gay men are “masculine.” Put another way, because hegemonically masculine black gay men conform to the dominant scripts for hegemonic black masculinity (except in the bedroom, which is not a allowable topic), they are acceptable as the “poster children” for black gayness.

Similar logics permeate how black gayness is understood within black-cast sitcom production. As exemplified in the ways Demetrius Bady, the writer for the *Moesha* episode “Labels,” fought to attempt to keep a flamboyantly gay character out of his script, and Jackie McKinley and Antonia March’s attempt to include gay guys who are just “regular” in their scripts, there exists a rejection of the black queer feminine body in black-cast sitcom production (on the rare occasion that black gay bodies exist). I am not suggesting that their motives are entirely problematic. Quite the contrary: I believe they are honestly attempting to do something different with black gay representation – however historicized, notions of “negative” stereotypes have resulted in a very narrow framework within which “good black gay televisual subjects” can be imagined. The writers and black gay men in the real world, are still reacting to and against the still-potent controlling image of black gay men presented in *In Living Color*, 25 years ago. However, this narrow representational closet that has been erected contains and constrains black gayness.

⁶ Joseph C. Conway and Alan M. Rubin, “Psychological Predictors of Television Viewing Motivation,” *Communication Research* 18 (1991): 449.

Humor, Black Gay Men and the Black-Cast Sitcom Trap

Industrially, the laugh track is an important tool for the black-cast sitcom. It functions as an aural marker of the place where humor is to be found within the genre. Part of the generic closet in which the black-cast sitcom is trapped is its heavy reliance on the laugh track which seeks to control the parameters within which audience reception happens. As the white-/multi-cultural cast sitcom has become less reliant on the laugh track, the black-cast sitcom has, in many ways, doubled down on the ideological device. Few black-cast sitcoms are produced without a laugh track (*Frank's Place*, *Everybody Hates Chris*, *Belle's*, and *black-ish* are among the few black-cast sitcoms that do not use a laugh track). Part of this reliance on the laugh track is also about a 3-camera shooting style, which allows series to be shot in a linear fashion (like a play). But the other part of this reliance on the laugh track is about attempting to control the spaces where black audiences *might* find humor.

While humor exists within episodes of black-cast sitcoms with black gay characters, that humor is rarely directed *at* black gay characters specifically but at gayness generally. The humor in these episodes is aimed at the strangeness of gayness within the heteronormative narrative universe of the series. In other words, while these series deploy black gayness in specific ways, they ultimately do not want to assume an anti-gay stance (although as the black gay respondents demonstrated, there are often disconnects within the dominant readings of the laugh track). The series in this project

highlight the ways in which black gayness is incongruous with black-cast sitcom worlds which, in turn, is a reflection of the ways the black audience is imagined.

The humor within episodes of black-cast sitcoms with black gay characters also works to make black gayness a strange/foreign intruder into the narrative. In the process of making gayness strange, it also props up idea(l)s about black masculinity within the domestic sphere. Black gayness is called upon to demonstrate the “proper” parameters within which “authentic” black masculinity exists and because gayness can never be imagined as existing within those parameters, it must be used for its humorous strangeness and then discarded – returned to the closet.

The black-cast sitcom, then, as a carrier of a set of discourses about blackness (whether real or imagined), reifies mass-mediated ideologies about blackness with respect to gayness. Black gayness can exist in these black-cast sitcoms because it can teach viewers something about the characters who weekly inhabit their homes. These black-cast sitcoms, from *Moesha* to *Are We There Yet?*, are happy to welcome black gayness into their worlds to demonstrate how “cool” and progressive they are. But black gayness can only be a temporary interloper within these narrative worlds. While writers cited a number of different reasons to explain why black gay characters are not frequently included within black-cast sitcoms, ultimately the reason can be reduced to this: black gayness, no matter how “positively” it is treated within the few episodes in which the topic is broached, is an unwelcome and unwanted visitor within the genre.

Implications for Future Research

In *Trapped in a Generic Closet*, I set out to make black gayness in black-cast sitcoms legible. When I have talked about this project, so few people, even those who consider themselves fans of black-cast sitcoms, remember black gayness within such series because their appearance is fleeting within narrative universes. While I have explored black gayness between 1996 and 2010 in *Moesha*, *Good News*, *All of Us*, and *Are We There Yet?*, with respect to discourses related to humor and the laugh track, production and audience reception, future research can/should examine more contemporary series. By undertaking such research, viewers may have the opportunity to have been exposed to them naturally rather than watching the series in order to participate in research. This may result in respondents having a deeper engagement with the series and its characters. Additionally, by discussing more contemporary series, on which writers and producers have worked more recently, they may be able to provide additional insights into the production process. In addition, such a study would offer researchers the ability to make temporal comparisons and links to social contexts based on more contemporary moments vis a vis *Trapped in a Generic Closet*.

Trapped in a Generic Closet is also a very specific project that does not engage with several areas that are equally rich sites for investigation with respect to black gay images in television. I deliberately did not undertake a comparative analysis of black gay characters in black-cast versus white-cast sitcoms or black gay viewers and another control group. While this work is undoubtedly important and can provide an illustration

of the convergences and divergences between two groups/types of sitcoms and intersectionalities with race, *Trapped in a Generic Closet* attempted to let black gayness and the black-cast sitcom stand on their own without whiteness or heterosexuality as “normative,” making the genre “Othered,” or making black gayness subject to what I have called, elsewhere “compound otherness” wherein with whiteness as a default, black gayness is two steps away from normativity.⁷

Outside of black gayness, another area where the methodologies employed in *Trapped in a Generic Closet* could be useful is with respect to black heterosexual viewers’ engagement with black gay images. This research focus would help to shed light on the ideologies industrially attached to black and lesbian, gay, and bisexual viewers and could perhaps disrupt the ways the industry thinks about black gay characters and programming for black heterosexual and gay viewers. In addition, another area of study that *Trapped in a Generic Closet* could influence is the study of white gayness and its relationship to production and audience research. Much of the research on white gayness has been limited to discussions at the level of the text rather than issues related to audiences, production and post-production. Additionally, with the exception of Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow, few scholars specifically pay attention to the contours of genre as they relate to representations of race and sexual orientation.⁸ This

⁷ Alfred L. Martin, Jr., “Doing Double Duty: Toward a Theory of Compound Otherness,” *FlowTV*, 14 (2011): accessed September 6, 2014. <http://flowtv.org/2011/08/doing-double-duty/>.

⁸ Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow. “Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces: *Will and Grace* and the Situation Comedy Genre,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 10, No. 1 (2002).

study of genre is particularly important because certain axes of difference are often segregated into particular genres: with few exceptions, black actors and black gay men are segregated into comedy (like *Let's Stay Together* and *Moesha*), and Latin@ actors are often segregated into American telenovelas (like *Ugly Betty* and *Devious Maids*). While there is a move toward multicultural casts, like the numerous series produced by Shonda Rhimes's Shondaland, when race or sexuality exists on its own in narrative television, it is often within dramatic series. An examination of what each genre allows (and disallows) with respect to representation is important to examine the ways genre functions as a closet for particular axes of difference and kinds of representation.

I remain hopeful that the black gayness will break out of its generic closet at some point in the (near?) future. The introduction of co-starring black gay characters in dramas such as OWN's *The Haves and the Have Nots* (2013 -) and FOX's *Empire* (2015 -) suggests that perhaps the black-cast sitcom will recognize that black gay men can exist within sitcom families. The black-cast sitcom, with its ripe possibilities for syndication and worldwide consumption, can make black gayness more visible. Until then, black gayness remains industrially and ideologically trapped in a "generic closet."

Appendix A: Audience Reception Participant Profiles

Methodologically, the interviews in Chapter 3 draws on 10 in-depth interviews with self-identified black gay men in Chicago and Detroit, who range in age from 22 to 53 although the majority of respondents were between 42 and 53 years old. The men in the study have an annual household income that ranges from less than \$10,000 to more than \$100,000 per year, although the highest concentration of respondents make more than \$100,000 per year. The men are mostly a college-educated group, with four respondents having completed a bachelor's degree and five men having completed a master's degree. The one respondent whose highest level of education completed is his high school diploma is also the youngest respondent in this study. All but one of the black gay men in this study identify most closely with the Democratic party, while one man identifies himself as Progressive/Independent.

The Respondents

CHICAGO

Alex is 46 years old, holds a bachelor's degree and earns between \$40,000 and \$59,999 per year. He identifies as a Democrat. He came out as gay when he was 19 years old as a strategy to get a date with a man whom he briefly dated.

Joe is 22 years old and is currently dating rather than being in a long-term relationship. He most closely identifies with the ideologies of the Democratic Party and makes less than \$10,000 per year. He is currently enrolled in college, but his highest level of education completed is his high school diploma. He first came out as bisexual to a few

of his friends when he was 13 years old, then came out as gay when he was 19, about three years before our interview.

John is 45 years old and currently lives in Chicago with his partner. He holds a bachelor's degree and is currently at work on a master's degree. He makes more than \$100,000 per year and identifies most closely with the ideologies of the Democratic Party.

Marcus came out as gay when he was about 18 years old; however he is currently not out to all of his family members. Although he has not come out to his family members or in his workplace, he has a partner with whom he shares a home in Chicago. He suggests that while he has not acknowledged his gayness to his family members, he is certain that they know he is gay but simply have not asked him. He is 47 years old, holds a master's degree, and makes more than \$100,000.

Peter is a 49-year-old black gay man. He most closely identifies and votes as a Democrat, and holds a masters degree. He makes between \$25,000 and \$40,000 per year. While he realized that he was gay at about 11 years old, he did not tell anyone he was gay until he was 17.

DETROIT

Dave is 42 years old, earns more than \$100,000 per year and holds a master's degree. He is biracial, with a white mother and a black father, but concedes that most people would not know that he is biracial unless he told them so. As a result, he identifies as black. He also identifies as a member of the Democratic Party. While he realized that

he was gay in 1981 when he was 9 years old, he did not tell anyone until he was 16 and told a fellow newspaper carrier to whom he was attracted.

Edward realized he was gay when he was about six years old. He came out as gay when he was 14 years old. However, he has not come out to all of his family members. Edward most closely identifies as a Democrat and is 53 years old. He holds a master's degree and currently makes more than \$100,000 per year.

Gary is a 48-year-old black gay man. While he acknowledges that he is of mixed race ancestry (both Native American and European heritages), he identifies himself as black. He currently works in technical support, holds two master's degrees and has an annual income of between \$60,000 and \$74,999. His coming-out process began when he was in his early 20s. However, he recognized that he was "different" and began coming to the realization of what that "difference" was when he was 10 years old. He politically identifies as Progressive and is partnered, but he and his partner do not live together.

Tim is 48 years old, currently makes between \$75,000 and \$100,000 per year and holds a Bachelor of Science degree. He identifies as a Democrat and first realized he was gay when he was between 5 and 10 years old, but he actually verbalized his gayness and told his mother when he was 13, who was convinced that his gayness was a phase out of which he would grow.

William is 38 years old and holds a master's degree. He is currently partnered, although they do not live together. His annual income is between \$40,000 and \$59,999 per year. He generally does not identify with a political party but currently identifies as

Democrat because of his affection for President Barack Obama. William came out as gay at 19, about four years after realizing that he was gay.

Appendix B: List of Black-Cast Sitcoms with Black Gay Characters

Below is a list of the black-cast sitcoms that featured black gay characters from 1977 – 2014. While there were a number of representations on black gay men on television more broadly, this list focuses solely on those in black-cast sitcoms, as these characters are the focus of this dissertation project.

1977 – 1978

Sanford Arms (NBC) – The series, a spin-off from the popular series *Sanford & Son*, ran for four episodes. The episode “Phil’s Assertion School,” featured Travis, a civil rights attorney. He is a friend of series co-star Angie, who ultimately tells her father that Travis is gay. The episode originally aired on September 30, 1977.

1991 – 1992

Roc (FOX) – In its first season, *Roc* featured the first of four episodes that featured a black gay character. Russell, played by Richard Roundtree, was the uncle to the axial family. In the episode, “Can’t Help Loving that Man,” Russell visits the Emerson family and gets married to his partner Chris in the Emerson’s living room. The episode aired October 20, 1991.

1993 – 1994

Roc (FOX) – In its second and third seasons, Richard Roundtree’s Russell returned to *Roc* in three episodes. In the second season episode “Second Time Around,” which aired January 17, 1993, Russell attends the vow renewal of Roc and Eleanor Emerson. On November 23, 1993, Russell awaits the arrival of Roc and Eleanor’s first-born child with other family and friends in the episode “God Bless the Child.” Lastly, the April 5, 1994 episode, “Brother,” concerns Russell announcing his intention to move to Paris because of the allegedly more progressive stance toward gayness and gay rights.

1996 - 1997

Moesha (UPN) – The “Labels” episode, which aired on October 1, 1996, concerns Moesha meeting, and briefly dating Hakeem’s cousin Omar. After meeting Omar’s flamboyant friend, Moesha begins to spread the rumor that Omar is gay.

Good News (UPN) – On the “Pilot” episode of the series, which broadly concerns the trials and tribulations of a church attempted to rebuild its membership after the departure of a beloved pastor, the new pastor is confronted with a parishioner who seeks his help in coming-out to his mother. The episode originally aired August 25, 1997.

2000 – 2001

The Parkers (UPN) – Series star, Nikki Parker seeks a new roommate in this September 18, 2000 episode. Instead of seeking a roommate who is most capable of paying the rent, Nikki chooses a male roommate who is the most handsome. Her new roommate, who Nikki sees as a potential romantic partner, turns out to be gay.

2002 – 2003

Girlfriends (UPN) – The first episode on which Peaches and Ronnie appear, “Sister, Sistah” aired February 4, 2002. The episode does not narratively concern Peaches or Ronnie; rather they are present (and have dialogue) within the beauty salon in which they work. The characters return on the episode “Handling Baggage,” which airs November 11, 2002. In the episode, Peaches and Ronnie tell series star Maya that they suspect her husband may be cheating on her with another woman. Peaches (without Ronnie) appears on the September 22, 2003 episode “If It’s Broke, Fix It.” On the episode, Peaches, who is now working as series star Joan’s assistant. His primary narrative purpose on the episode is to provide relationship advice to his boss, Joan.

2004-2005

Girlfriends (UPN) – On March 29, 2004, the *Girlfriends* episode “Love, Peace and Hair Grease” does not narratively concern Peaches or Ronnie. However, much of the episode’s action takes place in Ronnie’s beauty salon. In “New York Bound,” which originally aired on May 24, 2004, Ronnie works as something similar to his cousin Maya’s book publicist. He brings her a five-figure offer to publish her book *Oh, Hell Yes!* In the last episode on which Ronnie appears before the series moved to The CW, he is offended when his cousin Maya hires an agent to represent her in attempting to sell her book to a major publisher.

2006-2007

All of Us (UPN) – On the two-part episode of *All of Us*, series star Robert discovers that his biological father is gay. The episodes, “Like Father, Like Son, Like Hell,” and “My Two Dads,” aired on November 13 and 20, 2006.

Girlfriends (The CW) – In the seventh season finale (its first on the CW), “It’s Been Determined,” which originally aired on May 7, 2007, Peaches nor Ronnie serve a narrative purpose on the episode.

2009 – 2010

The Game (The CW) – On the January 23 and 30, 2009 two-part episode of *The Game*, the fictional San Diego Sabers are confronted with having a black gay player on their team. The episodes, “Stay Fierce, Malik,” and “Do the Wright Thing” featured the black gay character Clay Smith.

2011 – 2012

Are We There Yet? (TBS) – “The Boy Has Style,” aired on January 19, 2011. The episode concerned Lindsey Kingston’s high school crush and her parents’ suspicion (and ultimate confirmation) that he is gay. The black gay character Cedric is a player on the high school football team.

Let’s Stay Together (BET) – The first episode on which Darkanian first appears is “Leave Me Alone.” The episode aired on April 24, 2012 and featured Darkanian, a closeted black gay man and professional football player. In the episode, Darkanian begins to woo Crystal. The Darkanian storyline continues in the May 22, 2012 episode “No Wedding and a Funeral,” finds Crystal moving into one of Darkanian’s “extra” apartments in downtown Atlanta. In the season two finale, “Wait... What?,” Crystal discovers that Darkanian is gay when his long-term boyfriend visits the apartment in which Crystal lives. The episode aired on June 5, 2012.

2013 - 2014

Let’s Stay Together (BET) – On the March 26, 2013 season three premiere, “See, What Had Happened Was...” Darkanian asks Crystal to be his “beard” – and offer she accepts. In the episode “Buyer Beware,” Darkanian and Crystal continue their public relationship, although Crystal begins to have sexual needs that Darkanian cannot fulfill. The episode aired on May 14, 2013. In the season three finale “Babies, Blindness and Bling,” Crystal is caught kissing a man who is not Darkanian, leading to a media brouhaha. She is required to hold a press conference where she apologizes for her adulterous relationship. At the press conference, Darkanian proposes marriage. The last episode on which Darkanian appears is “Game Over,” wherein Darkanian comes out as gay. The episode airs on April 1, 2014.

Appendix C: Black-Cast Sitcom Viewer Interview Questionnaire

Background

1. In what year were you born?
2. How do you racially identify yourself?
3. Do you identify yourself as heterosexual, bisexual, gay or something else?
4. Annual personal income bracket (excluding income of a partner or boyfriend's income)
 - a. Less than \$10,000
 - b. More than \$10,000 but less than \$24,999
 - c. More than \$25,000 but less than \$39,999
 - d. More than \$40,000 but less than \$59,999
 - e. More than \$60,000 but less than \$74,999
 - f. More than \$75,000 but less than \$99,999
 - g. More than \$100,000
5. What is your highest level of education completed?
6. To which political party do you most closely identify?

Coming-Out

7. How old were you when you first realized you were gay?
8. What age were you when you first told someone else that you were gay?
 - a. Who was that person?

- b. Do you still have a relationship with that person?
 - i. If not, why?
- 9. Have you acknowledged your homosexuality to all of your family members?
 - a. If not, have you acknowledged your homosexuality to any of your family members?
 - i. If so, how many?
- 10. Have you acknowledged your homosexuality to all of your friends?
 - a. If not, have you acknowledged your homosexuality to any of your friends?
 - i. If so, how many?
- 11. Did you lose friendships/familial relationships as a result of your acknowledgement of your homosexuality?
- 12. What fears did you have related to your coming-out?
- 13. Who/what helped you to come out?

Black Gay Characters in Black Sitcoms

- 14. How do you define a black sitcom?
- 15. What are some of the shows you classify as a black sitcom?
 - a. Probe: *The Cosby Show*? *Amos n Andy*? *Everybody Hates Chris*? *A Different World*
 - i. If any of these shows are not black sitcoms, why not?
- 16. Overall, how do you think black gay men are represented in black sitcoms?
 - a. Are they represented differently in sitcoms generally?

- b. Are they represented differently in dramas?
- 17. Of the episodes from the series I gave you for this project, which of the series did you regularly watch?
 - a. If you watched the series beforehand, do you remember the episodes with black gay characters?
 - b. Did you watch these shows in their original run or as reruns?
- 18. Prior to viewing the episodes I gave you for this project, did you recall having seen black gay men on television?
 - a. If yes, who were those characters?
 - b. How would you characterize those image(s)?
 - c. How did those characters make you feel?
- 19. Which episodes did you watch?
- 20. What are your initial thoughts on the episode?
- 21. How do you feel about that representation?
- 22. Did any of the black gay characters seem like real people to you?
 - a. If so, which ones?
 - b. If not, why not?
- 23. What do you think that representation says about [the era] in which [show] was produced?
 - a. What do you think the representation says historically about gay representation on television?
- 24. How important is it for you to see black gay men on television?

25. How, if at all, do you think seeing/not seeing black gay men on television influenced your coming-out process?
26. Do/did you look to television characters to teach you what it meant to be gay?
27. Did television shows or television characters help to teach you what it meant to be gay?
- a. If so, what show(s) and/or character(s)
28. Did television shows or television characters help to teach you how to “act” gay?
- a. If so, what show(s) and/or character(s)
29. Do you see yourself depicted on television shows?
- a. If so, which ones?
 - b. If so, are there specific characters with whom you identify?
30. Do you see yourself depicted in black sitcoms?
- a. If so, which ones? Describe them.
 - b. If so, are there specific characters with whom you identify?
31. Are the representations of black gay men in black similar to or different from your experiences/knowledge as a black gay man?
32. What do you think these images of black gay men say about this group to black communities?
33. What qualities/characteristics would you like to see in black gay characters in the black sitcom?
34. Were there characters on television who were not explicitly gay that you thought might be gay?

- a. Who were these characters?
 - b. Why did you think they were gay?
35. In the absence of gay characters, were there other characters you gravitated toward?
- a. Who were those characters?
 - b. Why do you think you gravitated toward that character?
36. Were there black sitcoms you watched that had what one might call a “gay sensibility” that you liked to watch?
- a. What were those shows?
 - b. Why did you think that?

Appendix D: Sitcom Writer Questionnaire

Background

1. How long have you worked in the television industry?
2. In what race/ethnicity do you identify?
3. How would you define the black sitcom?
 - a. What are some of the shows that you define as black ?
 - b. Probe: *The Cosby Show*? *Amos n Andy*? *Everybody Hates Chris*? *A Different World*?
 - i. If any of these shows are not black sitcoms, why not?
4. On how many black have you worked?
5. What are some of the other shows on which you have worked?

Black Gay Characters in Black Sitcoms

37. Are you aware of any black gay characters on black sitcoms?
 - a. If so, which ones?
 - b. What do you think generally about the black gay characters you can recall?
38. Why do you think there are so few black gay male characters in black sitcoms?
39. Have any of the shows on which you've worked featured gay characters?
 - a. If yes, what were those conversations like to include these characters?
 - b. If no, why do you think there have been no gay characters?
40. If your show included gay characters (or considered including gay characters) what race were these characters?

- a. Why do you think the character was that race?
- 41. In the script you wrote that included a gay character, what was the impetus for creating the character?
- 42. What was the discussion like in the writer's room?
- 43. Was the idea for the script workshopped before you went off to write?
- 44. How did the script change from the time you wrote it to the time it was recorded?
- 45. Was there any push back from other writers? Actors? Productions staff? The Network?
- 46. What were some of your concerns writing the script?
- 47. To what extent do you think gay watchdog groups make writers afraid to include black gay characters?
- 48. Overall, how do you think black gay men are represented in black sitcoms?
 - a. Are they represented differently in sitcoms generally?
 - b. Are they represented differently in dramas?
- 49. What do you think would need to happen in order to get more black gay characters into the black sitcom

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